Title: Minds working together: Scaffolding academic writing in a mixed-ability EFL class

Author(s): Le Van Canh and Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh

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Minds working together:

Scaffolding Academic Writing in a Mixed-Ability EFL Class

Introduction

Teaching mixed ability classes is a way of life to many ESL/EFL teachers. Richards (1998) has asserted that “Every class we ever teach is mixed ability” (p.1). In a similar vein, Rinvolucri (1986) argues that “We do not teach a group, but thirty separate people. Because of this, the problem of mixed abilities in the same room seems absolutely natural, and it is the idea of teaching a unitary lesson that seems odd” (p.17). Therefore, one of the roles teachers should seek to develop is creating a more successful methodological approach to their mixed ability class so that they neither leave the struggling students behind nor fail to engage advanced students.

Writing is not only an important form of communication in day-to-day life but it is even more necessary for students who are preparing for their university study. This is because academic writing is one of the most important aspects of academic literacy that every scholar should possess in order to get socialized in their disciplinary communities. However, writing for academic purposes is really a challenging task for students who are studying English as a foreign language. The skills involved in writing are highly complex on the one hand, and the students’ own culture has its own styles for organizing academic writings which are not always compatible to the English academic conventions, on the other. As Casanave (2002) aptly points out, academic writing poses a “clueless” challenge because the rules of the “game” are almost all implicit (p.19). Of all these, textual competence (Bachman, 1990), or the ability to develop and organize their ideas in an academically persuasive manner according to “rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization” (Bachman, 1990, p. 88) constitutes the most formidable and crucial
challenge. From our personal experience as classroom teachers, we share with Hayashin’s (2005) observation that students’ writings more often than not end up lacking a clear logical flow and unity, not to mention a persuasive linear argument.

If learning how to produce writing that will satisfy the norms of the academic communities in which they wish to enter is a challenge to the students, preparing students with varying English proficiencies and from a non-English cultural and academic background to become flexible writers who can effectively tackle an academic writing task from a variety of angles poses a major challenge to EFL teachers. Because students are linguistically of mixed abilities, a particular classroom writing task which is motivating and manageable to some students can turn out to be really daunting to others. It is understandable that teachers of multilevel classes often complain that “writing is the most problematic skill to teach in such classes” (Hess, 2001, p. 77). Therefore, academic writing teachers in the EFL context have to cope with at least three tough questions emerging from a mixed-ability writing class: (i) How can all students get involved in the writing task?; (ii) How can the stronger students’ motivation and interest be sustained while the chance for the weaker students to complete the task be guaranteed?, and (iii) How can students benefit most from their cooperation in the classroom so that all can progress during the course?

In seeking the answers to these questions, we drew on the socio-cultural view of language learning as a socially constructed process where collective scaffolding through peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student collaboration can help students complete writing tasks which are a little bit beyond their current competence (Hannafin, Land, & Oliver, 1999; Linn, 1995; Vygostky, 1978). A scaffolded approach to teaching academic writing has been adopted by some language educators (e.g. Cotterall & Cohen, 2003), but little has been documented about how this approach can be used in a mixed-ability class in the EFL setting.

The concept of scaffolding, which is coined by Bruner (1980), and rooted in the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, has become widespread in discussion of second or foreign language classroom instruction (e.g. DelliCarpini, 2006; Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Ko, et al., 2003; Gibbons, 2002, 2003). Scaffolding is defined as a temporary framework that supports a
building during construction. When the structure is sturdy enough to stand on it own, the scaffold is removed (Kim & Kim, 2005). In an educational sense, scaffolding, in the form of coaching or modeling, supports students as they develop new skills or learn new concepts. When the student achieves competence, the support is removed, and the student continues to develop skills or knowledge on his or her own (Gibbons, 2002). As Donato (1994 cited in Cotterall & Cohen, 2003) has explained that

in a social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence (p.158).

Defined this way, scaffolding appears to be an appropriate instructional strategy for a mixed-ability class where the teacher as well as the more capable students can “create supportive conditions” for the less capable students through collaborative work. In other words, scaffolding, as an instructional strategy, can help create active interactions between a teacher and students and also between students themselves. In their study to investigate the influence of negotiation of meaning on ESL learners’ performance of a story telling task, Ko, et al. (2003) expanded the meaning of scaffolding by emphasizing the nature of the contribution of the learner in any scaffolding situation. They found that “scaffolding is a two-way exchange. For the help actually to work, the less knowledgeable other must be in a position to benefit from what the more knowledgeable other provides” (p. 322).

This chapter reflects on the use of scaffolding as an instructional strategy in teaching academic writing skills to a mixed ability class in an EFL context. Based on this reflection, it discusses how different scaffolding techniques can be adapted for students of different proficiency levels.

**Context**

This study was conducted within the context of a pre-university intensive language program in Hanoi, Vietnam. The aim of the program was to enhance the learners’ general and academic English skills so that at the end of the program they would be able to participate successfully in an international university setting in Hanoi. The intensive English language program comprised three courses. General English (GE)
Level 1 was intended for pre-intermediate learners, GE Level 2 for intermediate learners, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for upper-intermediate learners. The placement test helped to enroll learners in the course that was most suited to their proficiency levels. At the end of each GE course there was another test to screen the learners for the next level up. Each course lasted 3 months with approximately 360 hours of instruction, including 45 hours of writing instruction. After EAP learners were required to sit the IELTS test for university entrance. They were expected to obtain an overall score of 6.0 for admission.

The fifteen participants of this study were enrolled in GE Level 2 between mid November 2006 and early March 2007. There were four males and eleven females in the group, ranging in age from 18 to 20. They were all high school graduates. Although the learners were enrolled in the intermediate level, their true proficiency levels, as demonstrated in their classroom writing performance, varied between low intermediate and intermediate. Still, even among the low-intermediate or intermediate students, there was a great variation in terms of their learning experience, academic writing skills, and formal knowledge of English. Nonetheless, they were generally motivated to perform well at the IELTS test at the end of the course for university entrance.

The intermediate writing class focused first and foremost on developing students’ essay writing skills. By the end of the course students were expected to be able to produce short essays to effectively explain, discuss and argue for their ideas. Another important objective of the class, though not explicitly spelled out, was to enable the learners to become independent, self-aware and self-motivated writers who can plan, execute and monitor their own writing, enjoy and are willing to take charge of the process.

In this writing program we co-taught the writing class for three hours every week, using the program’s course books which were *College Writing: From Paragraph to Essay* by Dorothy E. Zemach (Macmillan, 2003) and *An Introduction to Academic Writing* by Alice Ohsima & Ann Hogue (Longman, 1997). Besides these, we also brought in additional materials, which were developed by ourselves, to ‘scaffold’ the learners through difficult writing tasks. The teaching approaches we adopted for this class
were both process-oriented and product-oriented in nature. During the program, scaffolding worked in a number of ways depending on the type of instruction being provided, but its inherent characteristic is that support in the form of “simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning” (Ovando, et al., 2003, p.345) is first provided, then retreated so that the student becomes self-reliant. Specifically, two types of scaffolds were employed, i.e. teacher-assisted writing and peer-assisted writing. Details of these two types of scaffolds will be discussed in what follows. After the students finished the course, they were asked to self-evaluate their progress by responding to a questionnaire which consisted of 15 questions covering all sub-skills that they needed to acquire in order to become self-reliant writers.

**Curriculum, Tasks, Materials**

Two major types of scaffolding, namely teacher-to-student collaboration and peer-to-peer collaboration, were employed for this group of students. The former included modeling, teacher-student conferences and teacher written feedback. The latter included peer writing and peer conferencing. These forms of scaffolding were employed in a series of lessons throughout the course. Because the students had only one three-hour writing session every week, we chose to use one or two kinds of scaffolding for each session depending on the focus of the lesson. In what follows we will describe how the learners were guided through the process of producing an essay in English in order to move from being novice writers towards becoming more fluent and independent writers.

**Modeling:** working with the model is to raise the learner’s awareness of the typical rhetorical pattern and linguistic features of different text types. Modeling enables learners to utilize the new language as a tool in the process of becoming self-regulatory so that their learning can be extended into what Vygotsky termed the “zone of proximal development” (Myles, 2002). As Fower (1994) has pointed out that when students “are supported by a scaffold of prompts and explanations, by extensive modeling, by in-process support, and by reflection that connects strategic effort to outcomes”, their writing expertise will be fostered (pp. 142-143). Modeling activities may involve the discussion and analysis of text structure, context and language (Hyland, 2003). Below is
an example of a text analysis activity that was employed to teach the target student group how to structure an argumentative essay.

Model

In recent years more and more Vietnamese students have chosen to study abroad, partly because more families nowadays can afford to send their children overseas and partly because more grants and scholarships are now available for the students. While studying abroad might have certain disadvantages, it is an attractive option for many people.

Going overseas to study has a number of advantages. To begin with, teaching quality in overseas universities might be better than that in students’ home universities. This is often because teachers in overseas universities are more highly qualified and adopt more update teaching methods. What is more, studying abroad gives students access to the facilities such as laboratories and libraries which are not available in their home countries. This certainly helps them a great deal in self-study. Studying abroad also gives students a good chance to learn a new language and new culture. This knowledge might be useful when they come to work in a multilingual and multicultural working environment later in life. Finally, living abroad alone, students will learn how to be independent of their parents, a necessary skill in life.

On the other hand, studying abroad also has some disadvantages. Firstly, students have to leave their family and friends for quite a long period, normally from 3 to 4 years to complete their study. Secondly, studying abroad is almost always more expensive than studying at one’s local university. Living in developed countries also costs more than living in Vietnam. Finally, learning in a foreign language is always more difficult and challenging than learning in one’s mother tongue, and if students’ language skills are not good enough, they will certainly be inhibited when learning in this language.

In conclusion, although there might be some disadvantages to going overseas to study; however, I believe these disadvantages are only temporary. In contrast, many of the advantages last students all their lives and make them highly desirable to prospective employers.

Activity

Read the model and decide which paragraph deals with each of these points:

1. Develops the argument that the essay defends
2. Briefly explains both sides of the argument
3. Includes a thesis that states the side of the argument the essay defends
4. Briefly explains both sides of the argument
5. Refutes counter-arguments that opponents might use
6. Restates the essay’s position on the issue
7. Identifies the issue that the essay addresses
8. Which words/ phrases are used to contrast ideas?

For this activity, the students worked in their groups and discussed while the group secretary took notes of the group members’ contributions. Then these notes were passed on to the group spokesperson to read aloud to the whole class, who then gave comments on the work. Usually, the weaker student in the group was nominated to take
the role of the group spokesperson. This was to help him or her gain greater confidence in the subsequent writing task.

Teacher-student conferencing: a writing conference is a conversation in which the writer reflects on and talks about his or her own writing (Penaflorida, 2002). Teacher-student conferences help the teacher to effectively cater for individual needs in a mixed ability class where needs might greatly vary. Feedback given in this way also seems to have more impact because the student had a chance to talk about his or her problems and discuss the solutions with the teacher on a one-to-one basis (Zamel, 1985). Individual conferences might also reveal the common problems among learners so that the teacher can offer on-the-spot whole-class guidance and support.

In this course teacher-student conferencing was used with flexibility. Sometimes teacher-student conferencing was combined with teacher written feedback as described in the paragraph that follows. Sometimes we moved around to offer individual support as needed while the students were writing. This kind of on-the-spot support was necessary to help different students with their own problems due to the difference in their writing proficiency. We might also collect common problems shared by the students and take time out to provide whole-class corrective feedback or re-teach the ‘problematic’ language features.

However, due to the limited class time we might not always be able to offer on-the-spot individual conferences and students sometimes might need more extensive consultation. Therefore, another way we conducted teacher-student conferences was to set a schedule outside the class hours and allow the students to sign up for extended conferences. Before that, we helped the students to reflect upon their own writing by providing a self-reflection guide (see below). When they came to their conference they brought the problems they wished to discuss with the teachers. In this way the conferences were made more relevant to the students’ needs. After the conference, the students went away to revise their writing and submitted it for more detailed teacher written feedback. They could sign up for another conference to discuss with the type up feedback they received from us if they wished to.
A guide for self-reflection

Complete these notes about your essay:

The topic of my essay is ……………………………………………………………………………………………
My purpose in writing this essay is …………………………………………………………………………………
My readers are ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………
The things I like most about my essay are ………………………………………………………………………
I like them because ………………………………………………………………………………………………………
The things I would like to change are …………………………………………………………………………………
I would like to change them because …………………………………………………………………………………
I need teacher’s feedback on ……………………………………………………………………………………………

Teacher written feedback: teacher typed up comments might serve as another source of regular support for learners. Teacher feedback might help learners to notice the gap between their production and the expected outcomes, point them to worthy sources, and keep them on the right track (Williams, 2003; Myles, 2002). According to Kroll (2001), teacher feedback and assignments are two most central components of any writing course. Effective teacher feedback therefore helps reduce students’ confusion and frustration (Williams, 2003; Myles, 2002), thereby helping them improve their writing proficiency to the point where they are cognizant of what is expected of them as writers whose writings have minimal errors but maximum clarity (Williams, 2003). To help students develop as writers teacher feedback should focus not only on language problems and ideas but also on strategies that students may apply to other written works (Ferris, 2004).

With a view to sustaining every student’s motivation in the class, and to maximizing the effectiveness of teacher feedback, we combined teacher feedback with teacher-student conferencing as mentioned above and peer conferencing described below. Specifically, we paired a more proficient learner with a less proficient one and guided the students how to help each other reflect on their own writing by providing them with the guidelines which was adopted from Hess (2001, p. 82) (see under Peer Conferencing section).
In the next step, students received their guidelines, read peers’ comments, and asked questions for clarification if they wished to. This was followed by students’ comparing their classmate’s comments with those of the teacher on their writing. To keep the stronger learner from feeling that she or he did not benefit from this activity, the teachers would need to spend a few minutes with each student to help clarify, explain or discuss their points further.

**Peer writing:** Using student collaborative writing is to arrange a more proficient peer to work with and assist a less proficient peer to construct a text under the teacher’s guidance. Peer writing encourages social interaction through which the writer is guided to gradually solve the problem that would normally be beyond his or her ability to solve (Brown, 2001). In this class peer writing was conducted through such pair or group activities as brainstorming, selecting and organizing ideas, and joint construction of texts under teachers’ supervision. In order to enhance the effectiveness of these activities, the teachers carefully selected pairs or groups and assigned each member a specific role. For example, the more proficient peers were requested to help the weaker peers to express their meanings in English by asking the latter questions and modeling for the latter. The teachers also took great care to establish a friendly learning environment for the learners to feel safe and cooperative.

**Peer conferencing:** Peer conferences are conducted to engage students in talking about their writing in order to learn from themselves and others Kroll, 2001; Campbell, 1999). In conferencing students are guided to share their work and help their peer reflect on his or her own work. However, they are not expected to correct the latter, but to discuss how the errors “impede their understanding of the texts” (Ferris, 2002, p. 329). Teachers can assist this activity by providing learners with peer conference guidelines, model the activity for them and monitor how they conduct it. The guidelines should clearly state the purpose of the conference, the expectations for the parties involved and the aspects of the essay they may want to consider discussing. Below is the guidelines that we used for our writing class. Through the process of peer conferencing, the better student could help the weaker one through collaboration, which is “a must in a multilevel class” (Hess, 2001, p.10).
Peer conferencing guidelines for the writer

The purpose of this conference is to help you improve your writing and develop as writers. Your friend will help you reflect on your writing process, your problems and your needs. Work with him or her following these steps:

1. Tell your friend what you think about your essay and what you want feedback on
2. Read your essay to your friend or give it for him or her to read
3. Ask your friend for feedback and make notes

Consider these points before you start

| The things I like most about my essay are | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

| The things I am not so sure when writing this essay are | ................................................. |
| .......................................................... |

| I need feedback on | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

Peer conferencing guidelines for the partner

Your role in this conference is to help your friend clarify or identify his or her writing problems. You can help to do so by sharing your feelings about the essay or asking your friends questions about the essay. However, you do not need to correct it. Please be as supportive as possible!

Make some notes about your friend’s essay before you talk about it

| The things I like most about this essay are | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

| I like them because | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

| The things I would like to know more about are | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

| The things I was confused about are | .......................................................... |
| .......................................................... |

When reading your friend’s essay tick √ in the appropriate box

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. This essay has three main parts: introduction, body, and conclusion</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The introduction states the topic of the essay.</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The body has more than one paragraph.</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections

In order to have the students self-evaluate their progress, a questionnaire was designed and administered by the end of the course. The questionnaire, which was in the form of an attitude scale (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Dornyei, 2007), was composed of 15 statements, focusing on the students’ self-assessment of their progress in composing a “reasoned text that is well-developed and supported with evidence and details” (Scarcella, 2002, p. 211) as well as their attitudes towards peer collaboration.

Data from the questionnaire indicates that students found the writing tasks more enjoyable and more effective when those tasks were scaffolded through collaboration between the teacher and themselves or among themselves. Such collaboration enabled the all students to progress during the course, and students were no longer left to “swim or sink” as they were in the traditional writing classroom. Scaffolding forms such as peer-conferencing, peer writing, and the combination of teacher-student conferencing with teacher written feedback did involve students of different writing competences in the writing tasks, therefore both stronger and weaker students became motivated and interested.

It might be the case that for scaffolding to work effectively in a multi-level class, various types of scaffolding are needed depending on students’ proficiency level as well as on their stage of linguistic development. For example, modeling seemed to work better for more proficient students. Since the students had acquired sufficiently grammar and vocabulary, all they needed to know seemed to be how to organize their ideas and arguments effectively. Peer conferencing seemed to be more helpful for less proficient students while teacher-student conferencing and teacher written feedback might work equally well for both strong and weak students.

Although students of different levels of proficiency tended to respond differently to different scaffolding techniques, teacher-assisted scaffolding in the form of teacher-student conferencing, and teacher feedback appeared to be more helpful to a multi-level class because students at any level of proficiency could benefit from such kind of support. Since different students had different problems and difficulties due to their different levels of proficiency in the target language, individual, on-the-spot scaffolds provided by the teacher might help students to move beyond their “zone of proximal development” and become independent writers more quickly.
According to Maybin et al. (1992), any particular example of help is considered to be scaffolding only if there is evidence of a learner’s successfully completing the task with the teacher’s help and evidence of the learner’s having moved to a greater level of independent competence as a result of the experience (p.186). The students’ perceptions of their progress in composing a piece of academic writing, their increased self-confidence as well as their positive attitudes towards peer collaboration could serve well as the two kinds of evidence. Although the evidence could have been more persuasively justified by the students’ performance in standardized tests, we believe scaffolding could be an effective instructional strategy for teaching mixed ability classes. It can be used not only for teaching academic writing but other language skills as well. Especially, when resources are limited, and students are of mixed abilities, scaffolding seems to be a solution which helps teachers to utilize the full classroom potential by helping students to “learn how to use one another as language resources” (Hess, 2001, p.10). By so doing, teachers can avoid an inherent problem of teaching a class of mixed ability that stronger students feel held back while weaker students feel pressured. However, to be truly effective, scaffolding needs to be progressively adjusted to address the needs of different students within the one classroom.

References


### About the authors

Le Van Canh is Senior Lecturer and a teacher educator working at Hanoi National University, College of Foreign Languages, where he lectures on Applied Linguistics at the graduate level. He has been a featured speakers in several international TESOL conferences and he has published in Teacher’s Edition, ASIA TEFL Journal, ASIA TEFL Book Series, and others. He can be e-mailed at canhqhqt@yahoo.com

Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh completed a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She is currently lecturing in Applied Linguistics courses at Hanoi National University, College of Foreign Languages. She is also working as a reviewing editor for Asian EFL Journal. Email: thuyminhnguyen@gmail.com