

Scaffolding Learners' Comprehension in Extensive Reading

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Abstract

The present study serves as an insightful teaching summary that focuses on students' reading comprehension, through investigating the effectiveness and application of a teacher's scaffolding in a one-semester extensive reading course. The teacher provides scaffolding throughout an entire semester of the extensive reading course. Students' performance on multiple-choice questions of the first as well as the last unit has been collected and analyzed to determine whether they have enhanced their reading comprehension abilities or not. Based on the both qualitative and quantitative data, the findings reveal that students' comprehension competence of extensive reading materials has notably increased after a semester of the teacher's scaffolding. The result suggests that reading skills such as guessing, outlining, identifying topic sentence of each paragraph and determining the main idea of a passage can be applied as effective scaffolding techniques in extensive reading courses.

Keywords: extensive reading, reading comprehension, scaffolding

1. Introduction

Reading plays a significant role in attaining academic success (Levine, Ferenzo, & Reves, 2000). Palmer coined the term extensive reading in 1921. Different from intensive reading, which focuses on languages, extensive reading gives more priority to the main idea (Palmer, 1921). Wood, Bruner and Ross proposed the concept of scaffolding in 1976, suggesting that appropriate assistance, support and direction offered by teachers can all be treated as scaffolding. Research findings reveal that scaffolding can promote the development of students' reading skills (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021; Duffy, 2002; Palincsar, 2003; Pressley, 2002; Saputri, Rizal, & Afriani, 2021). It is crucial in promoting learners' understanding of a text (Duffy, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Palincsar, 2003; Pressley, 2002b). However, Salem (2017) indicates that many English language teachers employ in-class scaffolding primarily to evaluate students' mastery of reading materials, with only a small number utilizing the technique to develop students' reading comprehension competence.

This study explores how scaffolding can be used in a one-semester extensive reading course to improve students' reading comprehension ability. More specifically, scaffolding in this course is modified based on four reading skills found in the textbook: Guessing, Main Idea, Topic Sentence and Text Structure, to help students have a better understanding of target extensive reading materials. It is essentially an insightful teaching summary written by the researcher, who teaches English Extensive Reading at a university in eastern China. A noticeable progress in students' reading comprehension has been observed after the teacher's scaffolding for one semester. Following parts illustrate the theoretical background (see Part 2), research methods (see Part 3), research results (see Part 4), discussion (see Part 5); and summary (see Part 6).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Extensive Reading

Palmer (1921) coins the term extensive reading (ER) and defines it as quickly read numerous books with an emphasis on understanding the context meaning rather than the language used. Extensive reading contributes positively to improving learners' reading proficiency (Jeon & Day, 2016; Nakanishi, 2005), aiming to derive enjoyment and information from reading (Palmer, 1921). Nation (1997) states that the chosen text of extensive reading should be slightly below the level of learners' current reading competence so as to help improve their reading fluency and expand their word bank.

Extensive reading materials and sessions can be organized by instructors (Pongsatornpiat, 2021). Day and Bamford (2002) have outlined top ten principles of extensive reading: Principle 1. Easy reading material; Principle 2. Various reading materials with different topics; Principle 3. Learners make their own reading selections; Principle 4. Learners read as much as possible; Principle 5. Reading for pleasure, information and overall understanding; Principle 6. Reading is rewarding; Principle 7. Fast reading speed; Principle 8. Individual and silent reading; Principle 9. Teacher-oriented reading; Principle 10. Teachers themselves are role models. Even though the ten principles have been commonly acknowledged and utilized in both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) context, not all of them are feasible to implement (Pongsatornpiat, 2021). The ten principles should be treated as important guiding principles of extensive reading rather than commandments that must be adhered to (Macalister, 2015). Teachers can select applicable ones based on the actual teaching context.

Researchers and investigators find that extensive reading programs comprise many advantages, including enhanced reading ability, vocabulary mastery, writing skills, study motivation, reading attitudes and so on (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Bell, 2001; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Feng & Webb, 2020; Iwahori, 2008; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser, 1989; Yamashita, 2008). Teachers need to carefully design extensive reading programs by taking into account both students' preferences and proficiency levels to choose appropriate reading materials, while also maximizing students' active participation in the program to ensure effectiveness of extensive reading (Bell, 1998).

2.2 Scaffolding

Wood et al. (1976) first introduce scaffolding as a theory in education. They describe scaffolding as appropriate guidance supplied by mediators, such as teachers, parents or advanced peers to enable learners, children or beginners to achieve something they are unable to accomplish independently. Scaffolding is based on Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD) (van der Stuyf, 2002), which highlights the gap between what children can do by themselves and what children can do with appropriate guidance from experts (Vygotsky, 1978). It offers assistance for learners to complete assignment just above their current abilities, bridging the gap between independent and guided performance, and ultimately aiding learners through their ZPD (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Hence, scaffolding and ZPD are inseparable with each other (Cazden, 1979; Krause, Bochner, Duchesne, & McMaugh, 2022; McDevitt, Ormrod, Cupit, Chandler, & Aloa, 2013; Ohta, 2000).

Expanded from the domain of construction, the term scaffolding in educational field is a metaphor for the assistance teachers give to learners (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010), and often shown as efficient methods of instruction (Cole, 2006; Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Pawan, 2008). Scaffolding in learning is temporary (van de Pol et al., 2010; van der Stuyf, 2002) and dynamic (Belland, 2014; van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005). As students become more proficient, the support provided by the experts will lessen gradually. Ultimately, students can successfully perform the corresponding task without any guidance from others (Chang, Chen, & Sung, 2002).

Scaffolding can be diverse in the academic context. Various forms of assistance provided by teachers, such as examples, models, clues and direct teaching methods, can all be seen as scaffolding in the process of teaching (Hartman, 2002). Belland (2014) demonstrates that scaffolding can enhance learners' both problem-solving and argumentation ability. In addition, scaffolding supports the development of metacognitive skills (Aleven & Koedinger, 2002; Azevedo, 2005; Quintana, Zhang, & Krajcik, 2005) and enhances the ability of content understanding (Azevedo, 2005; Linn, 2000).

3. Methods

3.1 Research Questions

This study explores students' capability of extensive reading before and after receiving support from the teacher, as evaluated through corresponding reading comprehension questions (multiple-choice questions). Multiple choice is commonly utilized for evaluating students' comprehension of a text (Amin & Wahyudin, 2022; Madani, 2016; Rupp, Ferne, & Choi, 2006), which can be employed in this study to measure the effectiveness of the teacher's scaffolding in the extensive reading course. The purpose of this study is to examine how the teacher's in-class scaffolding improves students' understanding of extensive reading materials, thus offering insight into effective scaffolding in extensive reading classes. Two main questions have been investigated in this study:

- (1) Can students' extensive reading competence get improved after teachers' scaffolding for a semester?
- (2) How can scaffolding be applied in an extensive reading course?

3.2 Participants

This study includes 39 freshman English majors from the same university class in eastern China. There are 4 male students and 35 female students, all approximately 18 years old, who have not been exposed to structured reading classes before, and this is their first time engaging in organized extensive English reading sessions. They just finished Gaokao but have yet to take the College English Test (CET4) and Test for English Majors (TEM4). Based on China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE, 2018), their proficiency in English falls within the range of Level 4 to Level 6, which approximately aligns with B1 to B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The researcher who conducts this research is the teacher in charge of delivering the extensive reading course to the group of 39 students.

3.3 Data Collection

The data of this study is collected during a full semester of an extensive reading course, running from September 2023 to December 2023. Participants attend the course on a weekly basis for a total of 16 weeks. English Reading I (2021) is the required textbook of this extensive reading course, which is edited by Zhao and Wang, and published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. It is a National Planning Textbook for General Higher Education Undergraduate in the 12th Five-Year Plan, which is specially designed for Chinese undergraduates who major in English. The entire textbook covers sixteen units discussing a range of topics, such as culture, sports, and business. Every unit consists of four reading passages, each around 1000 words in length. Before the start of semester 2023, eight out of sixteen units have been selected for in-class reading practice, taking into account students' interests and curriculum requirements of the faculty. The remaining eight units from the textbook are set aside as additional reading materials for students to use after class.

Due to the limited class time, each class is divided into two 45-minute periods to focus solely on text I, the first passage of each unit, with the teacher providing scaffolding during the entire reading process. The remaining three passages serve as supplementary reading materials for learners to study independently after class, helping to ensure and enrich the reading quantity.

It is a blended teaching design that integrates students' independent reading and the teacher's scaffolding. Before in-class reading process, students preview text I of each unit by identifying unknown words. During the independent reading session, students practise guessing skill while reading extensively, and the teacher gives support if necessary. After this, the teacher guides students in practicing four reading skills (Main Idea, Topic Sentence, Text Structure and Outline) in order to help them gain a profound understanding of text I. The process of helping students practise reading skills to analyze text I serves as scaffolding to assist learners in fully comprehending the extensive reading materials.

Following the first passage of each unit, 8-10 corresponding comprehension questions (multiple-choice questions), from the main idea to the purpose of writing, are designed in the textbook to check students' comprehension of extensive reading materials. Learners need to independently finish the exercise and submit their answers to the online learning platform Xuexitong within a 15-minute timeframe after reading and scaffolding. Xuexitong, developed by Chaoxing company, is an educational platform for users on smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices. It is an application that integrates mobile teaching, mobile learning, mobile reading, and mobile social networking, which can be used for quantitative data collection.

In addition to quantitative data, a written interview has been carried out to gather qualitative data after completing the 16-week course. Six students were randomly selected from the class, and their perspectives on the effectiveness of in-class scaffolding (reading skills) were gathered. Four questions have been designed in the written interview: 1. Do you think that the teacher's in-class scaffolding (demonstration and application of reading skills) can help you with extensive reading? 2. If your response to question one is "yes", please answer: How does the in-class scaffolding assist you with extensive reading? 3. In your opinion, which in-class scaffolding technique is most helpful for extensive reading? Why? 4. In your independent reading, which reading skill has been utilized the most? Why?

Mixed method, which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, has been carried out in this study. Participants' perspectives can be precisely understood through qualitative method (Richards, 2009), which can ensure the authenticity and accuracy of data analysis, while quantitative result collected from Xuexitong can increase reliability and validity of the entire research.

3.4 Data Analysis

The main instrument includes reading comprehension questions (multiple choice) from the textbook and a written interview designed by the researcher. Multiple-choice questions are a frequently used tool for testing learners' literal understanding of a text (Amin & Wahyudin, 2022; Madani, 2016; Rupp et al., 2006), and comprehension of a text is the key aspect of extensive reading. Hence, multiple choice can be viewed as an effective method to assess learners' extensive reading ability in this study. Students' performance on comprehension questions in Unit 1 (the first unit learned in class) and Unit 13 (the last unit learned in class) are analyzed as the quantitative data to see if the teacher's scaffolding works in increasing students' extensive reading competence. To conduct the statistical analysis, the researcher has utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 26) in this study. More specifically, the paired t-test has been used in this research for significance test. If the probability (p) value is less than 0.05, it indicates that the discrepancy between the scores of two units is notable. For the qualitative one, descriptive content analysis is employed to analyze students' interview data.

4. Results

4.1 Comparing Participants' Scores of Two Units

Based on the data collected from Xuexitong, more than fifty percent of participants (20 out of 39) is unable to complete the reading comprehension assignment of the first unit (Unit 1) on time (within a 15-minute timeframe). However, after the teacher provides scaffolding throughout the entire semester, all of the students have managed to complete the reading comprehension assignment of the last unit (Unit 13) in time, revealing a noticeable improvement in the entire class's extensive reading speed as well as reading competence due to the teacher's appropriate guidance.

The following Table 1 displays the paired t-test results for the comparison of participants' reading comprehension scores in Unit 1 and Unit 13.

Table 1. Paired t-test on reading comprehension scores of Unit1 and Unit13

Pair	Unit1- Unit13	Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
1		-53.5256	37.4944	6.0039	-65.6799	-41.3714	-8.915	38	<0.001

As displayed in Table 1, the probability (p) value marked as Sig. (2-tailed) for the entire extensive reading class is smaller than 0.001, showing a statistically significant increase in students' overall accuracy when answering reading comprehension questions. It suggests that the teacher's one-semester scaffolding has successfully enhanced students' comprehension of extensive reading materials.

4.2 Comparing Average Scores of Two Units

Table 2 shows the average scores of the entire class including those who did not submit for Units 1 and 13, as well as the average scores of the submitted assignments.

Table 2. The mean scores of Unit1 and Unit13

Category	Unit 1	Unit 13
The mean score of the whole class	33	87
The mean score of the submitted assignment	68	87

Information provided by Xuexitong (Table 2) displays that the mean score of the whole class, including the students who did not submit the reading assignment, has risen from 33 in unit one to 87 in unit thirteen before and after the teacher's scaffolding, showing a 164% improvement in students' overall accuracy of answering extensive reading comprehension questions. In addition, the mean score of the submitted reading assignment has risen from 68 in unit one to 87 in unit thirteen, indicating a 28% increase in extensive reading comprehension accuracy. Through the teacher's appropriate scaffolding, students have enhanced their competence in extensive reading, and has demonstrated a statistically significant increase in the accuracy of extensive reading comprehension questions.

4.3 Students' Perspectives on In-class Scaffolding

According to students' response in the written interview, all interviewees (six students) agree that the in-class scaffolding is conducive to improving extensive reading competence. Three of them indicate that the scaffolding technique of Guessing helps them read more quickly and fluently. Two of them find that scaffolding techniques of Topic Sentence, Text Structure and Outline enable them to better organize and understand extensive reading materials, while one of them believes that incorporating all scaffolding techniques can significantly enhance overall extensive reading competence. For the most effective in-class scaffolding technique, three students recommend Guessing, two students suggest Text Structure and one student mentions Topic Sentence. In the process of independent reading, half of them apply Guessing the most, while half of them utilize Text Structure the most. For example, participant Wang reports that she frequently utilizes Guessing to enhance reading fluency.

5. Discussion

This paper has explored the effectiveness of teachers' scaffolding in extensive reading course. The data collected from Xuexitong and the written interview indicates that students' extensive reading performance has got enhanced after receiving assistance from their teacher. Following the teacher's scaffolding throughout the entire semester, students' extensive reading comprehension as well as extensive reading competence shows a significant improvement, suggesting that scaffolding from teachers can be conducive to enhancing students' extensive reading skills. The increase of students' ability to fluently read extensive reading materials as well as accurately answer reading comprehension questions also reflects the enhancement of students' extensive reading proficiency.

However, some obstacles also occurred during the implementation of in-class scaffolding techniques. The classroom instruction of reading skills (in-class scaffolding) has been found hard for students to keep up with when they are taught in English. The teacher modifies the presentation to include both English and Chinese. Demonstrating reading skills in English before translating them into Chinese results in a marked enhancement in students' comprehension of the in-class scaffolding. The teacher's scaffolding techniques in the extensive reading course are adapted from four reading skills in the textbook and are presented as below:

5.1 Scaffolding One: Guessing

Palmer (1921) describes extensive reading as reading quickly with attention to the main idea rather than the language used in the text. Using a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words during the extensive reading is not recommended because it can interfere with the flow and pace of students' reading (Lupescu & Day, 1993). Conversely, the strategy of guessing the meaning of unknown words from a text plays an important role in students' reading comprehension (Cheng, 2003; Laufer, 2003; Nation, 2001; 2015). Hence, the skill of Guessing can be considered as a useful scaffolding technique in extensive reading.

During the first session of the extensive reading course, students are introduced the Guessing skill by the teacher. This reading strategy involves using context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words. In the next 15 sessions, the teacher helps students to identify and highlight unknown words before reading the text, then encourages them to utilize the skill of Guessing to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words during the extensive reading process. The teacher offers help during the activity of Guessing, leading students to infer the meaning of unknown vocabularies by using definition clues, example clues, common sense clues, class relationship clues and contrast relationship clues. Below are some examples that have been demonstrated in class:

- (1) The child had a **wan** look. He was so pale and weak that we thought he was ill. (definition clue)
- (2) **Rodents**, such as rats, mice and squirrels, are plant-eating animals. (example clue)
- (3) Tom got on the motorbike, and his girlfriend sat behind him on the **pillion**. (common sense clue)

(4) William used a variety of colors in his painting, including red, yellow, indigo, violet, **cyan**, etc. (class relationship clue)

(5) I just got a **budget** airline ticket to Beijing for 300 yuan, so I don't have to buy the expensive ones. (contrast relationship clue)

According to feedback from randomly selected students, Guessing improves their reading speed and reading fluency. It is also considered to be one of the most effective and commonly utilized reading skills in extensive reading.

5.2 Scaffolding Two: Main Idea

General understanding (main idea) of a passage should be the major focus of extensive reading (Carrell & Carson, 1997; Day, Bamford, Renandya, Jacobs, & Yu, 1998; Renandya, 2007; Zhou & Day, 2021). In this teacher-guided extensive reading course, students are taught the definition of main idea as well as the distinctions between the topic and the main idea to have a basic understanding of the reading strategy. According to demonstration from the teacher and examples from the textbook, the main concept of a written work is referred to as the main idea. It is a complete sentence that explains the author's point, while a topic is the main subject of a text and is typically conveyed through words or phrases. Main idea can be viewed as the motivation for a writer to write an article, including presenting an argument, sharing an attitude, conveying an idea or providing information. During the course, the teacher guides students in figuring out the main idea of each extensive reading passage by focusing on the illustration above and the topic sentence of each paragraph below (see 5.3) to enhance their overall reading comprehension.

Based on the information gathered from the written interview, Main Idea helps students clearly understand the meaning of reading materials, and the comprehension of a text is the major focus of extensive reading.

5.3 Scaffolding Three: The Topic Sentence of Each Paragraph

Due to the length of reading passages and the constraint of in-class time, it is somewhat challenging for students to directly summarize the main idea of a whole passage. In order to help them efficiently grasp the main idea, the teacher offers scaffolding by guiding them to identify the topic sentence of each paragraph. Bain (1890) states that the topic sentence is often found in either the opening or closing part of a paragraph. In this course, the teacher summarizes the topic sentence strategy as four Chinese characters: “shǒu èr mò yī”, meaning that students should pay attention to the first as well as the last sentence of each paragraph when analyzing topic sentences. Additionally, the middle sentence of a paragraph can convey the overall concept if nothing relevant is found in the opening or closing part. By locating all topic sentences, students are able to figure out the main idea of the corresponding text more easily and more accurately, ultimately improving their proficiency level in extensive reading.

According to students' response, Topic Sentence is beneficial for them to predict the main idea of a passage, leading to improved comprehension of reading materials.

5.4 Scaffolding Four: Outline and Text Structure

Making an outline of a passage can enhance comprehension during the reading process (Tan, 2015), and paying attention to the structure of a text can serve as a useful support for reading comprehension (Duke et al., 2021; Eliata & Miftakh, 2021; Fisher & Frey, 2015; Grabe & Stoller, 2020). As previously stated, the main emphasis in extensive reading should be the general meaning of an article. Therefore, in this study, the teacher utilizes “Outline and Text Structure” as a scaffolding technique in the extensive reading class to help students better understand the main idea of reading materials. Text structure can be inferred according to topic sentences mentioned above, and the reading skill of Outline is divided by the teacher into four steps: 1) recognizing the subject; 2) recognizing the main points; 3) constructing the first category/point; 4) constructing subcategories. After figuring out the text structure and outline, students are able to have a thorough understanding of a reading passage.

Outline and Text Structure has been chosen as one of the most efficient and useful scaffolding techniques by the participants interviewed. Students indicate that their ability of organizing a passage has been significantly enhanced with the help of Outline and Text Structure, resulting in a faster comprehension of reading materials.

6. Conclusion

This research investigates the effectiveness of a teacher's scaffolding in an extensive reading program, and explores different scaffolding techniques in an extensive reading class. The finding indicates that appropriate scaffolding from teachers is conducive to improving students' extensive reading comprehension, and the illustration as well as application of reading skills such as guessing, outlining, identifying topic sentence of each paragraph and determining the main idea can be treated as useful scaffolding techniques in a teacher-guided extensive reading course. The students' extensive reading comprehension competence displays a statistically significant enhancement in Unit 13 (the last unit learned in class) compared to their performance in Unit 1 (the first unit learned in class), indicating that the teacher's scaffolding is effective and efficient.

Due to time constraints and the limited size of the class, this study focuses solely on the experimental group, making it impossible to assess the impact of scaffolding on both the control and experimental groups. Besides, only limited qualitative data were gathered. Future studies could include data from a control group for stronger internal validity.

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