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SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES IN OVERPASSING LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

In educational systems, teachers focus on the involvement of students in learning and on building a solid relationship of trust and collaboration within the foreign language class. To this effect, different methods are consistently used, with clear and adapted learning objectives. The current paper is based on analyses of teaching situations and practices based on the scaffolding method. It discusses strategies used by teachers to improve students' speaking and writing skills by positioning the concept of scaffolding at the heart of the reflection. Scaffolding, which, basically, involves breaking down large tasks into smaller steps, represents an efficient tool to monitor and guide students to gradually build a linguistic autonomy, and to communicate in writing or orally with little or no help from the teacher.

KEYWORDS: scaffolding, skills, speaking, strategies, writing

1. Introduction

Scaffolding is a term specific to the field of constructions, where it refers to a temporary platform used to provide a certain level of support to a standing structure throughout the construction phase.

The idea of metaphorically using scaffolding in the language class belongs to several researchers. In the late 1950's, it was Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist, who first introduced the theory of scaffolding. He used the term to describe the acquisition of oral language by young children.

Learning depends in part on the type of assistance provided by the teacher. Therefore, the activity developed by the teacher in the scaffolding must be able to develop learners' autonomy. *"One sets the game, provides a scaffold to assure that the student's ineptitudes can be rescued or rectified by appropriate intervention, and then removes the scaffold part by part as the reciprocal structure can stand on its own"* (Bruner, 1983, p. 60).

The concept of scaffolding is related to that of the Proximal Zone of Development (PZD) introduced by the

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Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky (1978). This term refers to difficult tasks that represent a challenge for the child. This zone is between those tasks that are too difficult for him/her (and this, even with the help of an adult) and those that are easy.

Psychic development is everything children are capable of doing on their own. On the contrary, potential development is what they can only achieve with the help of a teacher or an adult who plays the role of guide. Scaffolding falls somewhere between these two levels of development. Thanks to scaffolding, the student, irrespective of his/her age, can achieve a goal that he/she could not have achieved alone. It can be doing a job, performing an exercise, or completing a project. However, scaffolding is not a shortcut. It is designed so that a competent person, such as the teacher or a parent, can provide the resources the child needs to overcome a challenge. The adult never does the work for the child. It is the child who does this work. Scaffolding can take various forms, by which the accompanying person invites the trained individual to become actively involved in his learning; it is therefore a collaborative and dynamic process.

2. Social Mediation and Acquisition of a Foreign Language

When used effectively, scaffolding can help a learner acquire content they would not have been able to process on their own. On the one hand, it is mediated by tools – language, symbols, gestures, even dictionaries or calculators, jointly constructed by the members of a socio-cultural community; on the other hand, it is mediated by the social and interactive practices within these communities. From this perspective, cognitive development is specifically based on the interaction between a student and the teacher, where the latter helps the student using various semiotic and other tools, to regulate his/her activities. This is how this one gradually becomes able to relatively autonomously plan, control and manage the task. However, only part of the regulatory work of the teacher comes down to direct assistance. Numerous studies in developmental psychology have shown that this work can also consist of encouraging the students, drawing their attention to specific dimensions of a task, or even simply supporting their interest in the task. It is to this diversity of support mechanisms that the notion of scaffolding refers in its original version proposed by Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976).

The notions of social mediation and scaffolding have been used for years as conceptual tools in the investigation of language teaching and language acquisition/learning processes. It is not, however, self-evident that these notions, stemming from an investigation into the development of the first language and the child's problem solving, are directly applicable to the type of interaction that takes place between teachers and their students in the language class, and to this specific object, which is communicative competence in a foreign language. The communicative approach dominates the teaching of foreign languages all over the world, and oral skills – both comprehension and production – have become a priority.

However, if these competences are clearly defined by the Common European Framework of reference for languages (CEFRL), oral competence is still tricky to teach and the choice of the method and the strategies in place in class often remain at the discretion of the teacher. In an exolingual environment, in particular, it is extremely important that the students be encouraged to develop oral communication skills. Thus, it seems interesting to us to look at the strategies of scaffolding put in place in speaking classes. Our research attempts to provide answers to the following questions: in what way do the foreign language teachers guide their

learners during oral lesson sessions? What is the nature of their scaffolding? To what extent does this promote cadets' understanding and oral production?

3. Scaffolding Strategies in Classroom Oral Interaction

We will attempt to establish a definition of the notion of scaffolding, which shows it more in terms of guidance and collaboration than in terms of compensatory mechanisms. This definition is based on a less unidirectional, but more reciprocal conception of the relationship between teacher and student, and on a more extensive notion of the different dimensions of discourse, which, alongside linguistic skills, are the objects, even the instruments of mediation in the context of learning of a foreign language. *"Scaffolding is actually a bridge used to build upon what students already know to arrive at something they do not know. If scaffolding is properly administered, it will act as an enabler, not as a disabler"* (Benson, 1997, 126-127).

Scaffolding is a strong hook in current educational proposals. How to use it in the classroom?

According to Bruner (2018), scaffolding involves six functions:

– enrollment: this is the first task of the teacher, where his/her commitment to the task and the students' interests are engaged;

– reduction of the degrees of freedom: the teacher simplifies the task, he/she fills in the gaps and lets students develop the parts (subroutines) to which they can arrive;

– orientation: the teacher maintains students' motivation to achieve their goal by showing them enthusiasm and sympathy;

– characteristics of the task: the teacher signals the characteristics of the task that are relevant to its execution;

– control of frustration: the teacher ensures that solving the problem becomes less taxing on him, and he/she measures his/her interventions;

– demonstration: the teacher makes a demonstration that will allow the students to imitate.

These functions have been developed for a guardianship context, in which the teacher and the student have an active part in the process. To have it implemented, learners must be active and the expert must leave room for them, not doing in their place but supporting them, questioning them or giving them clues for example.

Here is an example of a sequential analysis of an extract from a text. The beginning of the excerpt shows a difficult start to the discussion. Although the teacher invites students to speak, they remain silent. Then, two divergent strategies for managing the activity enter into conflict. The teacher insists and the result is a purely mimetic activity in which the students produce a list of statements, consisting of a serialization of reiterations and which manifestly lacks a relevant communicative issue for them. They set up a rudimentary production, articulated with long silences and explicit or implicit refusals to talk. Subsequently, the teacher agrees to a real exchange of points of view.

The students, encouraged by the teacher to share their opinions, produce long and more complex interventions, seeking to interpret the content of the paragraph. The transformation of the task carried out following the initiative of the students implies a re-conceptualization of the methods or strategies of action of the interlocutors. It is, in fact, based on a kind of micro-reframing, which translates into a redefinition of the conversational roles of the teacher and the students. The exchange of opinions then replaces reproduction. An activity strongly pre-specified and regulated by the teacher gives way to a joint construction of the content and the course of the interaction.

What is particularly significant in this example is not simply the fact that an initial

task is transformed following the initiative of the students, but that it is transformed into a richer, and maybe even an acquisitional space on the communicative level. Indeed, as soon as a real activity of exchange replaces the simple reiteration of contents known in advance, the students deploy a discursive work, much more complex than before: they begin to react to the interventions of others, to explain their points of view, to argue, to put forward hypotheses.

These observations lead to a central point regarding the mediation process: the teacher's language support is only one of the scaffolding processes he/she implements. Linguistically, he/she confirms hesitant formulations, provides the words or formulations the students need and corrects them. However, this language support is intertwined with a more general process of support that is based on the interactive, interpersonal and ideational dimensions of the joint activity: the teacher encourages the students to express personal opinions and reinterprets their observations in order to invite them to explain themselves, to defend their point of view or to further clarify it. Through these different means, students are involved in an interactive dynamic activity that requires them to mobilize various language resources. The complexity of the students' discursive work is articulated here in relation to the multidimensional and reciprocal nature of the scaffolding processes implemented by the teacher.

The teaching posture is also important. A posture is a pre-constructed structure (scheme) of "think-say-do", which a subject invokes in response to a given situation or school task. Subjects can change posture during the task according to the new meaning they attribute to it.

The posture is, therefore, both on the side of the subject in a given context, but also of the object and the situation, which makes it difficult to grasp and prohibits any labelling of subjects. Bucheton and Soulé (2009) propose the

– accompanying posture: the teacher provides occasional assistance laterally, partly individual, partly collectively, depending on the progress of the task and the obstacles to be overcome. […] It provokes discussions between the students, the search for the necessary references or tools.

– teaching posture: the teacher formulates, structures knowledge, standards, possibly demonstrates them. He/She is the guarantor. He/She then does what students cannot yet do on their own. […] The knowledge, the techniques are named.

The scaffolding postures make it possible to account for the diversity of the behaviour of the activity of the students by the teacher during the class.

4. Scaffolding in Writing

Writing requires several activities simultaneously: fit into the communication situation in which one finds oneself, develop ideas to convey a message, organize the text, advance the information, and ensure coherence between the sentences. The challenge is important for the students who also need to produce correct sentences, have a precise and adapted vocabulary, take care of the spelling and ensure the layout.

When you have a linguistically heterogeneous group of students, it is not enough to offer them writing topics; you must offer, among other things, constant scaffolding and modelling. One of the most common scaffolding techniques is to provide the necessary vocabulary before writing. Teachers can provide an overview of the words that are most likely to give students problems through a revision of prefixes, suffixes, keywords and their meanings, or by using synonyms, homonyms or paraphrases. It is also important to diagnose the various difficulties encountered by some students during the first writing work – establishing

a typology of these difficulties will lead to the formulation of hypotheses on the relevance of different types of support students might need; these hypotheses will be put into practice during the different stages of written production, favouring devices accessible to students during writing (occasional aid), and feedback on their writings at the end of the task (annotations and evaluations); finally, we take stock of these different systems, also taking into account the feelings of the students themselves.

The teaching of writing should not be isolated. On the contrary, it should constantly be put in relation with the other components of the language, whether it is oral, reading or grammar. The writing process should solicit the four language skills (oral and written production, oral and written comprehension). It also requires research skills. Moreover, the teacher must offer support to the students before they are called upon to write independently. Scaffolding, in this case, is the essential tool for teachers to help students accomplish these tasks. Scaffolding consists in taking in hands the elements of the task, which initially exceed the students' capacities, thus allowing them to concentrate their efforts on the only elements that remain in their field of competence and to bring them to fruition.

Inviting students to compare their texts with each other to create a socio-cognitive conflict, disagreements of points of view is an important activity that brings the need to use model texts. This work of comparison, analogies and discrimination leads to identifying the characteristics of the text to be produced and to determining guidelines in terms of structure for rewriting. It also reassures students and equips them with the strategies needed to write. It allows them to have an overview of what they have and can draw from the proposed texts – ideas, techniques, and words – to take up as their own in their own productions. Thus, in addition to the gain relating to the format itself, another benefit is the deployment of both ideas and vocabulary, it being understood that the students enrich their writings by also introducing into their texts comparisons from the model texts.

5. Conclusions

Students in a class do not learn at the same pace, so teachers in every area of content need to get creative in order to meet the needs of all students. One way to assist them is by using scaffolding strategies. Scaffolding strategies can be applied to any academic task, from teaching the processes in several stages in the reading or speaking class, to understanding the use of verbal moods and tenses in the foreign language they study. Teachers can share a concept or skill, while providing students with the necessary assistance at each stage.

In conclusion, scaffolding is a tool that is frequently used by teachers to enhance student development. Many of them have certainly already used this technique without necessarily giving it a name. Unfortunately, some teachers do not always put it into practice, although it is a fantastic tool for the students to learn to accept frustration, and being a driving force when it comes to fulfilling tasks within their reach in order to develop their language skills and knowledge.

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