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Task-Based Language Teaching and Socio Cultural Theory Basis for Effective Scaffolding in a Communicative Approach Class: Context Matters

» Abstract

This paper aims to present some significant concepts on Task-Based Language teaching (TBL), Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Active Learning, Experiential Model and scaffolding that laid the theoretical framework for designing communicative tasks. More specifically, this action research focused on the creation of lesson context through the implementation of collective scaffolding strategies that would serve two equally important purposes: motivating students to take risks and increase their oral interactions, and introducing the key vocabulary they needed to carry out the successive stages and tasks of the lesson. The population catered to was made up of university students from a variety of faculties who were taking level 1 classes in an EFL communicative approach program. Different kinds of resources and mediation strategies were used. Informal visual assessment of learners' performance and peer-teaching observations were carried out in order to compile, compare and analyze the effectiveness of the strategies and their outcomes in terms of the amount

of oral production and confidence levels among the students. This peer-teaching initiative aimed at designing well-structured scaffolding an activity in which there was room for both teachers' structured planning and students' input. At the end of the course, informal surveys were conducted among the students to determine the overall impact of the communicative scaffolding strategy provided. Some of the benefits of combining TBL and SCT concepts to design vocabulary scaffolding tasks are described while methodological considerations for future research are provided. Theory, research and pedagogy crossed paths and merged in the design, implementation and assessment of the present action research. The main objective of the design and implementation of the vocabulary scaffolding activity described in this paper was to answer these questions: How can TBL scaffolding help increase students' confidence and encourage them to take more risks along the lesson? What are some effective TBL scaffolding strategies that can be used to introduce a topic in an ESL class? How can effective scaffolding activities make the successive tasks more meaningful for the

learners? What kind of language scaffolding can help reduce affective filters that affect students' comprehension of the input provided in class?

Keywords: Sociocultural Theory, Task Based Learning, Scaffolding, Communicative Approach, Active Learning, Experiential Model

» Introduction

Some theoretical concepts from Vygotsky's Sociocultural, Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theory and Task Based Learning theories, were combined to provide the foundation for a vocabulary pre-teaching scaffolding activity for an English lesson. There was a preliminary revision of literature in order to design an effective scaffolding activity that would help university students from a Psychology program to succeed with the different activities included in the level 1 lesson plan.

The end goal was to help the students feel confident and successful so that they would enjoy and later apply what was taught. The literature reviewed showed a great variety of teaching theories and approaches on how to effectively teach a second language. The sheer number of studies conducted and papers published is proof enough that this is a big concern and goal for many educators all over the world who have devoted their time and effort to improve their students' language learning. The main goal of this study was to see and put some of that theory into action.

One of the teachers who designed the scaffolding activity had learned about Task Based Learning theory during a course she had recently taken. Both teachers had also read extensively about Vitkosky, Krashen and Bruner and their claims. They knew they could use what they had learned to help their students learn. The scaffolding activity that will be described was designed to make those theories come to life in their classes. These are the reasons why the teachers chose to draw from some specific theories:

- Why Communicative Approach? Because all the English programs offered by the university where they work are based on this approach.
- Why Task Based Learning Theory? Because those programs are heavily influenced by this theory. Furthermore, some of the teachers were enrolled in an online TBL training so that they could learn about and apply its principles in their lessons.
- Why Communicative Theory? Because the activities implemented in the English classes are strongly focused on helping students move to a higher L2 language developmental level.
- Why Scaffolding? Because it is considered a crucial stage in the L2 learning process and, when appropriately designed, it can increase students' confidence and success levels when performing the assigned tasks.

The main goal of the vocabulary scaffolding activity was to determine if visual scaffolding, when paired with a simulation of real

life communication, could effectively help the students understand and retain new words due to the elimination of negative affective filters and the provision of a more comprehensible input.

» Background

Some principles of the Sociocultural Theory introduced by Lev Vygotsky are:

- Learners participate in joint activities and acquire new strategies and knowledge of the world and culture.
- Properly organized learning results in mental development.
- Developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historical settings such as family life and peer group interaction.
- Regulation happens when a person is regulated by another more knowledgeable or experienced person in the shared social activity.

Some major contributions of SCT to SLA that have derived from Vygotsky's core ideas are the following:

- The introduction of the concept of 'mediation' in language learning classrooms.
- The understanding of students as people who bring their own cultures to the classroom interactions.

- The notion that SLL can occur in different places in various forms.
- The concepts of ZPD and Scaffolding that help teachers understand that learner potential development can be achieved using a mediator and assisted help from teachers and peers.
- The inspiration it has given to some approaches such as task-based learning, and the collaborative approach. Zhang, D., Fan, Y., & Du, W. (2013).

According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, there is a gap between the current developmental level of the learner and the potential level he can achieve with assistance from a more experienced and knowledgeable person (Howell, 2002). Additionally, he claims that the social interactions that happen in a learning context are mutually beneficial. On one hand, the learner gets the necessary support and guidance to move to the next level in the Zone of Proximal Development. On the other hand, the teacher gets feedback that can be used when making planning decisions. With regards to Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory, he affirms that input must be made comprehensible for the learner. He also claims that affective filters, such as anxiety and fear, affect language acquisition. Bruner combines Vygotsky and Krashen's core ideas to define scaffolding as the assistance provided by giving comprehensible input that would make the learner move into the zone of proximal development Maley (2012).

» Scaffolding in Task Based Learning

A 'scaffold' is understood as a supporting framework within which learning can take place. Some examples of scaffolding activities are:

- Pre-teaching some key vocabulary items needed during a listening or reading lesson.
- Using brainstorming to remind students of what they already know about the topic to be developed in the lesson.

Scaffolding is important in task-based language teaching because: It gives learners reassurance, motivation and support when the language they need to carry out the task is beyond their proficiency level. Moreover, it provides a context for the lesson. Visual scaffolding is an excellent way to provide comprehensible input to ESL (Nunan 2016).

» Scaffolding in L2 Learning

Some key points to take into account when talking about scaffolding are the following :
a.- Scaffolding can be successfully conducted by teachers or peers. b.-Language classrooms need to be learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. c.- In learner-centered classrooms students have more opportunity to receive and provide scaffolding and share responsibility for their own learning. (Wilson, 2008)

» Five Criteria for Effective Scaffolding

Howell, C. (2002) briefly condenses the criteria that must be taken into account before planning a scaffolding pedagogical activity into the following fundamental points:

1. Student ownership of the learning event: The instructional task must allow students to make their own contribution to the activity as it evolves.
2. Appropriateness of the instructional task: Meaning that the tasks should build upon the knowledge and skills the student already possesses, but should be difficult enough to allow new learning to occur.
3. A structured learning environment: This will provide a natural sequence of thought and language, thus presenting the student with useful strategies and approaches to the task.
4. Shared responsibility: Tasks are solved jointly in the course of instructional interaction, so the role of the teacher is more collaborative than evaluative.
5. Transfer of control: As students internalize new procedures and routines, they should take a greater responsibility for controlling the progress of the task. For instance, the amount of interaction could actually increase as the student becomes more competent.

» Communicative Approach

Nunan (2006) characterizes this approach as one in which language is a resource for creating and exchanging meanings between individuals and groups. As a consequence, activities involving simulation of real communication must lead students to 'learning by doing'. The selection and sequencing of communicative tasks should guide learners to succeed when dealing with real-life communication. Role plays, simulations of out of class communication are examples of such tasks.

» Experiential Model and Active Learning

According to the Experiential Model, learners have to do the learning for themselves. The role of the teacher is to create the conditions through which this can happen. Students learn through active experiences in the classroom. (Nunan, 2016)

Some key Active Learning principles are: 1.-Learners acquire language through using it. 2.-Learners should have opportunities to use the language rather than listening to the teacher talk. 3.-Teacher-focused work should not dominate class time. (Nunan 2016)

» Roles in Task Based Learning

The roles that both learners and teachers can have during a teaching-learning activity

are varied. (Nunan 2016) These are some of the most relevant learner roles:

- The learner as an interactor and negotiator who is capable of giving as well as taking.
- The learner involved in a process of personal growth.
- The learner involved in a social activity that includes psychological learning processes.
- The learner as a responsible party for their own learning, developing autonomy and skills.

» Implementing Visual Scaffolding in an EFL Class

The lesson designed was based on the study plan provided by the University Language Center, for level 1. The population was made up of 2 groups of university students whose ages ranged between 20 and 48. Most of them worked during the day and studied in the evening. High school years were a remote memory for them. English was not easy to understand for most of them. When they arrived in the classroom they were already exhausted and had little motivation. Their teachers decided to provide an attention-catching, motivating and effective scaffolding activity that would allow them to understand and retain the personality traits vocabulary they were going to need in the successive tasks. It was intended to be a different activity and the first difference was that both groups were merged so that the

teachers could co-teach while presenting a Youtube video that introduced and illustrated different adjectives.

(Describing personality <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SQOIPKruwM>)

Basically, the teachers pretended to be a pair of friends chatting, like most people do, about other people's personality traits. As the video progressed they would make comments about themselves, some of the students or a famous person in order to exemplify each adjective. A very informal but grammatically well-structured speech was used in their interactions. All of this was supported by the visuals provided by the video itself. As the "chat" went on, the atmosphere became more and more relaxed. A few students started taking risks and made contributions to the teacher's dialogue. Gradually, other students joined. That was an activity that started with very low linguistic demands from the students and that allowed them to increase their participation. As their participation increased, so did the linguistic demands.

Some students moved from using body language, such as raising their hands or pointing to someone, to elicit short, simple sentences to describe either themselves or someone else. They had already studied the simple present form of verb to BE and that was the grammatical structure they used throughout the activity. The most risk-taking students contributed to the conversation by suggesting names of people who, in their opinion, fit some of the personality characteristics presented. Respectful humor was a crucial ingredient for the success of the activity. The students used their examples as tools to

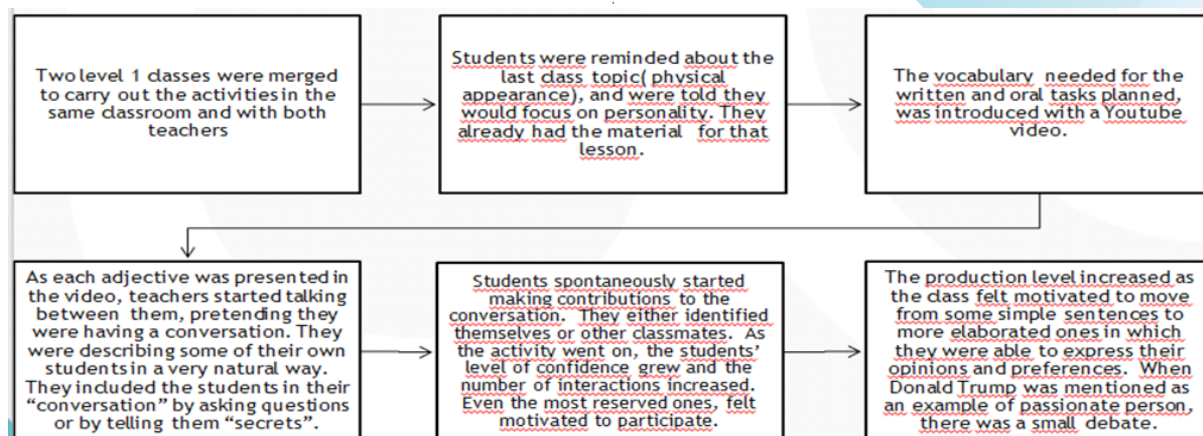
ask for confirmation and clarification of the meaning of each adjective. Synonyms and antonyms were provided by both teachers and students and the list of adjectives grew. Teachers asked them to give some specific examples, to check for understanding.

Socio Cultural theory principles were present when both teachers, as the knowledgeable party in the interactions, regulated and motivated their students to participate in the social and learning experience provided. By doing this, students were led to mental development and to the acquisition of new strategies. In other words, the scaffolding activity helped them move to the next level in their zone of proximal development. Teachers helped them and encouraged them to close the gap between what they could do at the beginning of the class and what they were able to do at the end of the class with the teachers' assistance. (See Fig.1)

One important concept applied in this activity was the negotiation of meaning that took place when teachers and students interacted. The forms of negotiation included comprehension checks, clarification requests, and confirmation requests. (Nunan 2016)

The activity merged the principles of active learning, communicative approach and experiential model since the simulation of real life communication led to an exchange of meanings that made the students learn by themselves while using the language introduced. Students became more responsible of their own learning and felt confident enough to interact and negotiate meaning through requests for clarification and confirmation. Two main learning strategies applied in this activity to achieve this goal

Figure 1



were: sharing personal opinions, feeling and ideas about personality traits. The students assessed and classified the adjectives into positive or negative categories and tried to support their choices. There was also brainstorming when they were requested to name the occupations that require people to be brave. All this exchange of communicative interactions helped the students increase and retain the vocabulary they needed in the listening comprehension, reading and writing activities they had to carry out throughout the lesson.

As previously stated, the objective of this activity was to integrate theory and practice to engage students in a truly enjoyable and meaningful learning experience. The following is a summary of how the interactions that took place during the scaffolding activity, helped the students develop greater confidence while moving to the next level in terms of vocabulary and language use.

» Findings and Discussion

Some of the outcomes of the activity implemented are the following:

- Increased class participation demonstrated higher confidence levels among students.
- With an increased confidence level, the students were able to move to proximal zone of development because at the end of the activity they were able to elicit more complex sentences to express their own opinions.
- The activity was student-centered. They had the opportunity to interact with their teachers and peers in a safe learning environment where taking risks was possible for them.
- The linguistic demands were low at the beginning and gradually rose. From simple yes-no, or positive-negative answers the moved to the

stage in which they could express more complex ideas. In some cases, their participation was non-linguistic, like raising hands or using body language, but they managed to demonstrate comprehension of the concepts taught.

- The scaffolding activity developed was effective because the students were appropriately prepared to carry out the following reading, listening, speaking and writing activities included in the lesson plan. It was easier to understand the oral and written directions.
- A high percentage of the students performed well in the successive linguistic exercises provided.
- Both teachers and students felt very motivated to ask for and to give more meaningful examples of people with the personality traits described.
- The combination of the TBL and SCT principles applied in the planning and implementation of this activity, proved that learning a second language in an active, student-centered way, is doable. Students, who are allowed greater involvement and creative contributions to the class they are presented, can better understand and retain the vocabulary and linguistic structures they used for their communicative purposes.

During the scaffolding activity there was a creation, exchange and negotiation of meaning between teachers and students

and among students. There was a simulation of real life communication that gave the students the opportunity to learn how to describe someone's personality by doing it in a more natural and less academic way. By providing the necessary scaffolding through the pre-teaching of the vocabulary, the teachers aimed at ensuring the successful completion of the next listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks.

With regards to the 6-step procedure proposed by Dr. Nunan (2016) to design a lesson, this scaffolding activity can be classified as schema building because it set the context and introduced the vocabulary they were going to use during the main communicative task of the unit in which they had to describe themselves and a family member. Out of the seven TBL principles described by Dr. Nunan, the activity focused on the first one, scaffolding, which is understood as the provision of support to the students and of context to the lesson.

Based on the theories previously described, there are some aspects that must be taken into consideration: First of all, visual scaffolding makes new vocabulary more comprehensible. With the visuals and their dialogues, the teachers created a pedagogical task that offered the necessary conditions to allow their students to understand and interact in the second language. Active Learning took place when the students freely and actively started using the vocabulary they were acquiring to describe themselves and others. The visuals, body gestures and changes in intonation used by the teachers in their fake chat made the vocabulary more meaningful and comprehensible for the students. Second, the following criteria were

taken into account to design the scaffolding activity: a.-Students were allowed to make their own contributions. b.- The activity took into account what the students already knew and that background knowledge helped them develop a sense of ownership. c.-All of this instruction was provided within a structured learning environment where the teachers transferred the control and the learners became more responsible of their own learning by using the strategies provided by the teachers.

» Conclusions

The most important conclusion, which confirmed the thesis that gave birth to this study is that, when properly designed and implemented, scaffolding activities greatly contribute to increasing students' confidence. This can be explained by the fact that they felt encouraged to take more risks and increase their oral and written production. As stated before, visual scaffolding and appropriate social interactions between teachers and students render the TBL scaffolding strategies even more effective when introducing a topic in an ESL lesson. All of this makes the successive lesson tasks more meaningful and easier for the learners.

Teachers need to know their students well before implementing this kind of scaffolding activity in an effective way. In this case, the teachers had already created bonds with their classes and this kind of positive affective filter greatly impacted the overall activity and its final outcomes. As it was later affirmed in informal interviews and surveys, the activity was as enjoyable for the teachers as it was for their students. In their own words,

they had a great time together and their students were acquiring second language vocabulary in a very relaxed, non-threatening way. Teachers started the scaffolding activity with very low linguistic demands and helped their students move to more demanding tasks such as classifying adjectives and briefly describing some famous people. The transition was very smooth for most of their pupils. Their scaffolding activity was a mutually beneficial interaction in which the students received the support and guidance they needed and, on the other hand, the teachers received valuable feedback to make future adjustments on the design of the lesson in order to maximize students' participation and understanding.

The video activity allowed the students to develop a sense of ownership of the instructional interactions because they were able to make significant contributions. It was challenging enough to make it interesting but not so hard that it would make them feel frustrated. Teachers gradually transferred the control of the interactions to the students and their role changed from provider of information to collaborator in their learning process. Most of the students performed very well in the successive oral and written activities. The bond teachers had previously created with their students before grew stronger and greatly benefited the development of the next lesson plans. Although this particular scaffolding activity proved the effectiveness of SCT and TBL principles to increase student's confidence and oral production, further application of those principles in the design of diverse scaffolding activities is suggested in order to determine

the exact impact different variables can have on the overall results.

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