Research Note

A Case Study: Scaffolding with Activities in College Remedial English Classes

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Abstract: In this paper, the author focuses on scaffolding activities to motivate students to learn in remedial classes at college. Based on the conditions for motivation indicated by Dörnyei (2001)\(^1\), a study was conducted to investigate what teachers should do in the classroom. To motivate students, teachers should first create an atmosphere where students can learn without anxiety. The sequence of scaffolding instruction worked well in a relaxed environment. Furthermore, good scaffolding activities facilitated a supportive classroom atmosphere. Through the teacher's careful assessment of students' levels, students were given appropriate scaffolding activities in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which led them to the stage where they could do activities alone. In a remedial class, teachers should take more responsibility to create a good classroom atmosphere to motivate students intrinsically by providing success-oriented scaffolding.

Keywords: scaffolding, remedial, ZPD, motivation, teacher's behavior, classroom atmosphere

1. Introduction

What should college English teachers do for students who lack basic English skills? It is a common question that we teachers confront in the classroom where many students do not have enough English proficiency for college education. This paper shows one example of a search for some solutions to this dilemma in remedial classes. Dörnyei (2001)\(^1\) argues that the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistence are key determinants of success or failure. That is, learners who have sufficient motivation can succeed in language learning. If remedial students are sufficiently motivated to study English in class, they might be able to better develop their English abilities at present. Then, how should teachers motivate students in remedial classes? Dörnyei (ibid.\(^1\)) also indicates the following three motivational conditions are indispensable:

- appropriate teacher behaviors and a good relationship with the students;
- a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere;
- a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms.

According to a survey by Dörnyei and Csizér (1998)\(^2\), it was revealed that the teacher's own behavior was the single most important motivational tool. This paper aims to provide an example of what kind of support should be given in remedial classes. The author focuses on scaffolding instruction as support in remedial classes. Scaffolding in pedagogical settings means giving appropriate support to students until they can use new skills and strategies by themselves. Especially in remedial classes, teachers should give more support to students by utilizing classroom settings which will possibly lead students to change their attitudes towards learning. Elaborate scaffolding activities on an appropriate level are necessary to give students confidence. This paper shows a case study of scaffolding instruction in a remedial class conducted by the author. Before describing the results of the study, an overview of the theoretical background of scaffolding and previous researches.

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on motivational factors in pedagogical settings is necessary.

2. Overview of the background theories
2.1 Zone of proximal development

![Diagram of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)]

The Figure 1 shows the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As this figure shows, the ZPD is the place where instruction and learning can take place. Vygotsky (1978) calls the place where a child can do a task alone and unassisted the zone of actual development (ZAD).

2.2 Scaffolding

The word *scaffolding* means a temporary structure constructed alongside of buildings to support workers in their skyward efforts. The concept of educational scaffolding originates from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. Lantolf and Thorne (2000) explain that the ZPD is defined by Vygotsky (ibid.) as the "distance between the child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance and in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Jerome Bruner (1962), a researcher in cognitive and educational psychology, used the term scaffolding as a metaphor to describe the kind of assistance given by the teacher or a more knowledgeable peer in providing comprehensible input and moving the learner into the ZPD. Dickson, Chard, and Simmons (1993 as cited in Larkin, 2002, p.1) claim that scaffolding instruction is "the systematic sequencing of prompted content, materials, tasks, and teacher and peer support to optimize learning." The sequence of scaffolding instruction is as follows: When students are learning new or difficult tasks, 1) they are given more assistance --> 2) with assistance, they begin to demonstrate task mastery --> 3) the assistance or support is decreased gradually --> 4) shift the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the students. In this sequence, assistance in the ZPD is called scaffolding. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976 as cited in Roehrer and Cantlon, 1996, p.9) describe scaffolding as "... controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learners capability thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence." Once students internalize the knowledge or skills obtained through the task, the teacher removes the scaffolding. Hartman (2009) explains that scaffolds may include models, cues, prompts, hints, partial solutions, think-aloud modeling and direct instruction. Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (2001) argue that the scaffolding is the environment the teacher creates, the instructional support, and the processes and language that are lent to the student in the context of approaching a task and developing the abilities to meet it. The activities provided in scaffolding instruction should be just beyond the level of what learner can do alone.

2.3 Motivational factors
2.3.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to Brown's (2001) explanation, intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally
rewarding consequences. Extrinsically motivated behaviors are carried out in anticipation of a reward from outside and beyond the self. Brown (ibid.) states that Maslow (1970) claimed that intrinsic motivation is clearly superior to extrinsic, and Bruner (ibid.) praises the "autonomy of self-reward."

2.3.2 Three motivational conditions

Dörnyei (ibid.) indicates three indispensable motivational conditions as mentioned in the introduction part of this paper. Among them, he focuses on appropriate teacher behaviors. The survey showed the participants considered the teacher's own behavior to be the most important motivational tool. Dörnyei mentioned that almost everything a teacher does in the classroom has a motivational influence on students. He indicates four points to be discussed as appropriate teacher behaviors: 1) enthusiasm, 2) commitment to and expectations for the students' learning, 3) relationship with the students, and 4) relationship with the students' parents.

2.3.3 Classroom atmosphere

In addition to appropriate teacher behaviors, we should consider language anxiety in mentioning the motivational conditions. Language anxiety is a strong factor in hindering the achievement of L2 learning. Dörnyei ranked the importance of the classroom climate as the second most important motivational tool. Teachers need to create a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere. To create such environment, Dörnyei points out that teacher's rapport with the students and students' relationship with each other are important. When students have a good relationship with each other, they feel comfortable taking risks in learning L2 in a safe and supportive classroom. A cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms was ranked as third most important by Dörnyei. According to him, a cohesive learner group is one which is 'together'; in which there is a strong 'we' feeling; and to which students are happy to belong. Dörnyei (ibid.) argues that student motivation tends to increase in cohesive class groups.

Good classroom atmosphere without fear or boredom is necessary to motivate students to study. To create a good classroom atmosphere, it is important to lower students' affective filters. Krashen (1982) claims that the 'affective filter' prevents learners from using input which is available in the environment. The affective filter is an imaginary barrier of negative attitudes, such as lack of motivation, or lack of self-confidence or anxiety. Students can ask for more teacher's help if they are not afraid of asking a teacher questions in class.

Brush and Saye (2002) conceptualize two types of support: soft and hard scaffolds. According to them, soft scaffolds are dynamic, situation-specific aid provided by a teacher or peer to help with the learning process. Hard scaffolds are static supports that can be anticipated and planned in advance based upon typical student difficulties with a task. Therefore, successful soft scaffolding in the classroom requires teachers to continuously monitor students' understanding and provide appropriate support when they have some problems. If students would converse with the teacher and make questions about their unclear points without stress, teachers could give constructive feedback. Accordingly, good classroom atmosphere is an indispensable factor which provides scaffolds to students. This present study therefore investigates the kinds of pedagogical scaffolding that will be effective for poorly performing students in a college in Japan.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and setting

The target class was a basic grammar course for freshmen at college. This was a remedial course conducted only in the spring semester with a small
class size, which was less than ten students. In the fall semester, students were supposed to take regular courses conducted in regular class size, which was about twenty five. The class level for each student was determined by the results of a placement test given at the beginning of the academic year. The target class is the lowest of thirty class levels, and the number of the students was eight. The level of the students was equivalent to that of the first- or second-year junior high school students. The class met once a week for 90 minutes. The course materials were handouts on basic grammar prepared by the college faculty members, not including the author.

3.2 Procedure

Based on the literature, the author researched whether students would be motivated when they were put in an environment which met the conditions mentioned in the background theories. It was hypothesized that remedial students had not developed their potential abilities well because they were not given appropriate support by teachers or more capable peers. Therefore, in this study, students were provided with success-oriented scaffolding activities which they could complete using their present skills. Their success in conducting the activity would give them confidence in their English, which might enhance their intrinsic motivation. As mentioned in the section on motivational factors in this paper, a supportive classroom atmosphere is necessary to motivate students. From this viewpoint, this study was conducted by the following procedure.

First, participants studied the handout explaining basic grammar structures. Based on the instruction of the handout, they put easy Japanese sentences into English. While they were writing the sentences, the teacher circulated the classroom and conversed with them to give clues for points which they did not clearly understand. Desks were arranged in a circle so that the teacher could monitor their activities well and all the participants could see each other's face. After completing the handout, they were given a worksheet which required them to fill in the blanks. The Figure 2 was the first worksheet the participants did in the course. Accordingly, this was intended to introduce each other. The first handout they studied in class was focused on be-verb and other SV structures. This worksheet was designed so that participants could pay attention to usage of be-verb, possessives and intransitive & transitive verbs. While they were filling in the blanks, the teacher monitored and gave them advice when they encountered difficulties in making English sentences. After filling out their worksheets, they introduced themselves in pairs. At this time, they read what they wrote. Then each student introduced him/herself in class. At this time, they were required to look up as if they were introducing themselves to all class members without any script. Before making their presentation in class, they were given some time to practice. At this stage, the scaffolds were gradually removed and they proceeded to actualize their own self-introduction in English by themselves.

![Worksheet example](image-url)
4. Results

In the target class, the participants produced easy English sentences based on the grammatical structures learned from the grammar handouts. Furthermore, they got other member's information in English. As a result, the class had a friendly atmosphere because they knew each other's personal background. In such an environment, participants relaxed and asked the teacher or peers about the points which they had not understood well in junior high school and senior high school. By practicing what they wrote in the worksheet with their partners, they gradually noticed they were communicating in English. They realized they were able to speak English after acquiring basic grammar skills. They had a sense of self-efficacy, which might encourage them to study more. In a remedial class, intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn for one's own sake, should be focused on. In addition, since they were able to introduce themselves in English with help of the worksheet, it can be said this scaffolding activity was in the ZPD, where learners could solve the problems with assistance. If the grammatical structures given in the worksheet had been too difficult for them, they could not have completed the worksheet. As the provided activity was in the ZPD, learning occurred and students developed their English abilities. They were able to internalize their skills, and those skills entered their ZAD, where learners can do a task alone and unassisted.

As one of the scaffolding activities in a listening class, students were provided with dictation worksheets where they filled in the blanks with the words or phrases while listening to the tape. The worksheets were prepared so that they could be scaffolds for developing their listening ability. The teacher played the tape again and again until most of the students could catch the words. At the end of the semester, some students commented that the worksheets were very helpful in understanding the grammatical structures and they found it important to make efforts to understand English without giving up listening to the tape. Furthermore, one student gave her opinion that she felt as if the class were taught specially for her because the teacher replayed unclear English sentences many times until she completed the worksheet. She added that such care and enthusiasm by the teacher made her happy, which gave her confidence in her English. She also mentioned her intention to study English again. From these comments, it might be said that this scaffolding activity with teacher support motivated the students to study.

5. Discussion

As Dörnyei (ibid.)\(^1\) ranked appropriate teacher behaviors the first among motivational conditions, it was observed that remedial students needed more support by the teacher. Teachers should clearly show students their enthusiasm and commitment to care for each student. While moving around the classroom to monitor students' learning process, teachers could give soft scaffolds. In the supportive atmosphere of this remedial class, students revealed their unclear points without anxiety. In addition, students were provided with level-appropriate worksheets as hard scaffolds. Both of the scaffolds worked well, and consequently students received appropriate scaffolding instruction. As for the context of scaffolding activities, Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (ibid.)\(^1\) argue that students need to be engaged in real everyday activities that have purpose and meaning. In the scaffolding activity introduced in this paper, the goal of the worksheet was to give self-introduction in English to facilitate good student/student relationship. Regarding meaningful purpose, the topic of the worksheet met the conditions of scaffolding activities which aroused students' needs.

6. Conclusion

It was observed from this study that the teacher's efforts to motivate students are more
needed in remedial classes. The literature for this study shows that there are some indispensable conditions to motivate students to learn. Considering those conditions, teachers should create the classroom where students continuously desire to learn. By providing the students with scaffolding activities, teachers should guide them to the stage where they can do the activities alone successfully. Therefore, it is important to assess students' abilities and use level-appropriate activities. Furthermore, the activities should be success-oriented ones. If they have an experience of success, they have confidence and they expect to succeed again. The scaffolding activities should be in the ZPD; just beyond the level of what learner can do alone, so that they can have a feeling of achievement. The activities should be not only the appropriate level which is in the ZPD but also ones that attract students' interest. In addition, good teacher-student and student-student relationships can facilitate the scaffolding process.

The target class had a small number of students; accordingly, the author was able to observe the students well and give level-appropriate activities, as well as establish good communication. However, for larger remedial classes, further consideration is necessary to determine appropriate scaffolding activities.

References

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