

Enhancing Speaking Ability through Intervening Scaffolding Strategies

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Abstract—The present study set out to investigate the effect of intervening scaffolding strategies on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. To do so, a sample of 60 Iranian EFL learners were selected based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The participants were then randomly assigned to two equal groups of experimental and control. The experimental group was taught speaking through intervening scaffolding by providing flexible opportunities for learners to use their knowledge, skills, and strategies in different contexts and for different purposes. Control group received routine techniques of speaking instruction. Based on the statistical results of the independent sample t-test, intervening scaffolding strategies had been proved to be successful in enhancing speaking ability of EFL learners

Index Terms—scaffolding strategies, intervening, speaking ability

I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is systematic articulation of verbal utterances in order to transfer meaning. It is “an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information” (Flores, 1999, p. 1). It is “often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving” (p. 1), but it is not completely unpredictable. Speaking is “the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts” (Chaney and Burk, 1998, p. 13). Speaking in second language has a great value for individual language learners since their proficiency in language learning is often measured by productive skills specially speaking ability. According to Richards (2008), speaking is the primary skill for evaluating the efficacy of a course since it is a medium to realize the proficiency in other language skills and sub-skills. Haung (2006) stated that non- native speakers believe that speaking in the target language is one of the most demanding and crucial tasks in their everyday life. Regarding these facts, speaking can be considered as one of the most studied and discussed areas of applied linguistics.

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, p. 28). According to Benson (1997), there are many different facilitative tools such as making the task smaller and more, manageable parts or using think aloud protocol, dialogue among peers, concrete prompts, questioning, coaching and cue cards or modeling which promote teamwork which can be utilized in scaffolding student learning. Other examples of scaffolding are those which deal with activating learners' background knowledge, providing some points, strategies, cues and procedures.

One of the problematic areas for language learners is developing speaking and oral proficiency. Students are often unable to make sense of textbooks' speaking activities and patterns. They are faced with the challenge of extracting meaning from the content. Moreover, language learners' inability to participate in class interactions and discussions negatively influence their self-confidence and performance in the language learning process.

Teachers, on the other hand, are concerned about how to provide situations that decrease teacher's talks and increase learner's talk. Teachers are forced to provide a large amount of instruction since they are pressed to meet the curriculum schedule. This may impose pressure on students, decline their motivation, and block their progress. A technique that helps to provide conditions for both teachers and students in order to take the advantages of class time and decrease the amount of pressure is worthwhile. It seems that scaffolding can divide the task of learning between teacher, learner, and peers in the area of reading comprehension.

According to Richards (2008), concerning speaking instruction, three issues should be considered. First, a decision needs to be made on the types of speaking skills in class based on questionnaires, interviews, and diagnostic testing. Second, the types of teaching strategies to teach speaking should be identified. The third issue refers to characterizing the expected level of learners' performance on speaking and the criteria for assessment of their performance. Most successful learners consider their own goals, needs, and stages of learning and use the appropriate learning strategies whose manners are more adjustable with them. It seems that learners that are more successful use a wider range of strategies in a great number of situations than poor ones do.

For many students, recognizing and using the traditional ways of language teaching are the most frustrating and difficult aspects of their language learning experience since they are not able to achieve sufficient knowledge of language skills or subject matters. Hence, the study was going to find the optimal ways of teaching speaking using scaffolding. In other words, in this study, the effect of intervening scaffolding strategies on development of Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability was measured. To address the objectives of the study, the following research question was posed:

- Do intervening strategies of scaffolding have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

II. METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

This study benefited from 60 Iranian EFL learners who were selected based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test (OPT, 2007). The participants' age ranges from 18 to 22. Their native language was Persian. The participants of the study were taught speaking skill accompanied by other language skills in their course. Since sex of the participants was not the focus of the present study, there was no control for sex variable applied. The participants were male ($n = 36$) and female ($n = 54$) students studying English language at the English language institute.

INSTRUMENTS AND MATERIALS

The instruments for the present study were Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET) functioning as pre-test and post-test. Following is the detailed explanation of the instruments.

Oxford placement test (OPT) has been used to assess the participants' language proficiency. It also enabled the researcher to have a greater understanding of what level (i.e., elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate) their participants were at. This test consists of 70 items, including 10 multiple-choice and true-false items for reading, 10 items for writing, and 50 multiple-choice language use items. The time limit for answering the 50 multiple-choice questions and the reading task is 45 minutes and the time limit for the accomplishing writing task is approximately 20 minutes.

The speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET) was used for pretest and posttest of study. The speaking section contains four parts. Each participant interviews with the interviewer. The interviewer asks the participants questions using standardized ones. The questions include providing factual and personal types of information. The participants expected to give information about their present status, past memories, and future affairs. In the second task, participants communicate to each other. Some pictures were given to the participants to help them in the discussion. In the third task, a color picture was given to each participants in turn and they were asked to talk about it for one minute. The pictures refer to the same topic. The fourth task was general conversation. The participants talked to each other based on the topic of the conversation which they initiated in the third task.

PROCEDURE

In order to investigate the effect of intervening and interactive strategies of scaffolding on EFL learners' speaking ability, a structured procedure was designed to collect data. The treatment procedure was conducted in 10 sessions during the summer semester in 2013. The research method used in this study to collect data was a true experimental one with the pretest-posttest control design. First, 104 EFL learners were invited to take OPT. Every correct answer in both multiple-choice and true false items was given +1 point and every incorrect answer was given 0 point. No penalty score was considered for wrong answers in this test. The total score of the test was 70. Forty four participants could not attain the minimum score (39) for the intermediate level. The participants were then randomly assigned to two equal groups of intervening ($n = 30$) and control ($n = 30$). Their speaking ability was measured by a speaking section of PET before treatment sessions. The pre-test was scored by two raters.

In this study, accuracy was measured according to Tavakoli and Rezazadeh (2014) who measured a dependent clause and at least one additional clause. Fluency was measured based on Wigglesworth and Storch (2007) who measured in terms of the average number of words, T-units and clauses per text. The performance of each participant on pretest was scored and analyzed based on the definite rating scales, as mentioned above, by two raters. The results confirmed that the reliability of the obtained scores were .98 that showed that the test was reliable.

In intervening scaffolding group, the teacher provided flexible opportunities for learners to use their knowledge, skills, and strategies in different contexts and for different purposes. Eight essential elements of intervening scaffolding instruction were used as general guidelines:

1. pre-engaging with the learners
2. building a shared goal
3. identifying the learners' demands and realizations
4. providing appropriate support
5. holding continuation of the goal
6. providing feedback
7. controlling the disappointment and venture
8. helping to maintaining learning and using in other situations.

The researcher initiated with what the learners already knew and were able to do, then scaffold the learners to reach the goal quickly, to help timid students to do like others, to be aware of withdrawing time, and to help them to be

independent doing the activity. The learners were prepared in order to perform this component. Finally, the learners were bombarded with a variety of examples in order to fully understand the instruction.

The control group participated in a normal speaking class, with routine teaching techniques and strategies. The teacher used authentic language – the language as it is used in a real context by giving the students a piece of recent news and a video episode of recent events. The teachers provided necessary directions for the learners. The students were asked to predict the sentences in episodes and they then produced different forms. The purpose was emphasis on the process of communication rather than mastery of the forms of the language. The learners were given opportunities to express their ideas and opinions in addition to their response to the activities. The learners' errors were tolerated and seen as a natural outcome development of communication language use. Finally, the groups' performances were tested by speaking section of another version of PET. The groups of study were compared to each other and their performance was compared to their primary performance.

III. RESULTS

Pretest was administered on the participants of all three groups in order to check their pre-knowledge of speaking at the beginning of the study. The descriptive statistics of the pretest scores are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS' PERFORMANCE ON PRETEST

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	Intervening	Rater 1	30	0	13	6.17
		Rater 2	30	1	13	6.13
	Control	Rater 1	30	1	13	6.45
		Rater 2	30	1	12	6.20

Pearson-product correlation was performed in order to test the inter-rater reliability of scores on pretest obtained by two raters in three groups of the study. The results of correlation for intervening group, as the Table 4.3 shows, confirmed that there is a significant relationship ($r = 0.98$, $p < 0.05$) between the scores of pretest obtained by two raters in intervening group. Thus, the inter-rater reliability of scores for intervening group is highly significant.

TABLE 2
INTER-RATER RELIABILITY OF THE INTERVENING GROUP ON PRETEST

		Pretest R (Rater 2)	Pretest R (Rater 1)
Pretest Intervening (Rater 2)	Pearson Correlation	1	.985**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of a Pearson correlation for control group are provided the Table 3.

TABLE 3.
INTER-RATER RELIABILITY OF THE CONTROL GROUP ON PRETEST

		Pretest control group(Rater 1)	Pretest control group(Rater 2)
Pretest control group (Rater 1)	Pearson Correlation	1	.981**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of a Pearson correlation for control group showed that there is a significant relationship ($r = 0.98$, $p < 0.05$) between the scores of pretest obtained by two raters in control group. Thus, the inter-rater reliability of scores in control group is also highly significant. The mean of pretest scores for intervening and control groups was calculated and was considered in this study. Table 4 provides this information.

TABLE 4.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF INTERVENING AND CONTROL GROUPS ON PRETEST

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest Intervening (Mean)	30	.50	13	6.15	3.325
Pretest Control (Mean)	30	1	12.5	6.32	3.341

A similar procedure was done for posttest scores. A high and significant inter-rater reliability was achieved for the scores of two raters on the posttest. The mean of the participants' scores on posttest is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP ON POSTTEST

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Posttest Intervening (Mean)	30	9	20.5	15.65	3.71
Posttest Control (Mean)	30	8	15.5	9.56	4.44

In order to examine the research question of the study, in finding whether intervening strategies of scaffolding have significant effect on EFL learners' speaking ability, an independent sample t-test was calculated between the posttest scores of intervening and control groups. The results are provided in Table 6.

TABLE 6.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST BETWEEN THE POSTTEST SCORES OF CONTROL AND INTERVENING GROUPS

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Scaffolding Strategies	Equal variances assumed	6.060	.017	-4.60	58	.000	-3.93333	.85508	-5.644	-2.221

The results of independent sample t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the performance of intervening and control groups ($t = 4.60, p < .05$) on posttest in such a way that the intervening group outperformed in posttest. In other words, intervening strategies of scaffolding had a significant impact on EFL learners' speaking ability. Thus, the research question of the study was verified.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study were in line with those of Wood and Middleton (1975), Yelland and Masters (2007) who approved that successful teachers use scaffolding strategies as an instructional tool to help individual students learn language skills. The results of this study approved what Poorahmadi (2009) and Mehrani and Modarresi (2011) found as scaffolding can improve the reading ability and general proficiency of EFL language learners.

The present study acknowledged the findings of Lee and VanPatten (1995) that found that instructional scaffolding should draw the relationship between the tutor and the learner in order to provide interaction between the reader and the text as an important factor in comprehension.

This study could confirm the findings of Swain and Lapkin (2000) who measured the impact of using first language as a scaffolding strategy to activate the thinking process leading to enhancing second language ability. They found that the task could not have been done effectively without the use of first language, even it might not have been fulfilled at all.

The findings of the present study support those of Van Der Stuyf (2002) who utilized graphs and tables as a scaffolding strategies in the instruction of scientific investigations and found that using pre-made tables could help the learners to consider the whole framework of the experiment and improved their understanding of the design.

It can be inferred from the results of this study that the use of scaffolding strategies can contribute to save time and energy as it summarizes the information. The use of intervening type of scaffolding, which its use was limited to the specific stage of speaking instruction, can be used in different stages of teaching speaking.

From this study, it was found that EFL learners' overall speaking ability was significantly improved after they had been trained to use scaffolding strategies. The present study filled a gap on the effectiveness of two instructional strategies of scaffolding in speaking. This interactive pedagogy allows EFL learners to practice and engage language forms within a more communicative setting. To sum up, interactive and intervening strategies of scaffolding are identified as the major vehicles to help EFL learners enhance their speaking ability.

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