Building Language Acquisition with Scaffolding Techniques

By Jane Averill

Have you ever noticed how experienced teachers use almost instinctive ways of analyzing the tasks they are teaching, dissecting those tasks into manageable steps, and providing helpful hints to assist students as they access challenging concepts? Researchers have studied these processes of highly effective teachers and adopted a metaphor from the building industry: scaffolding. Peregoy and Boyle (1997) explained that scaffolding involves the setting up of “temporary supports, provided by capable people, that permit learners to participate in the complex process before they are able to do so unassisted” (as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.166). When teachers provide carefully designed support for students to tackle challenging linguistic material, they give the students a chance to first gain skills with assistance and confidence and then move toward learner autonomy. As teachers build their awareness of scaffolding techniques, they are better able to reflect on and share their own techniques with others, as well as expand their own repertoires.

To understand scaffolding techniques, a teacher should consider the metaphor of scaffolding in the construction process. What comes to mind might be the image of a temporary platform or support that helps the construction team reach areas and work on the levels of the building that would otherwise be inaccessible. Celce-Muria (2001, p.195) explained the term, “scaffolding,” as the way in which “a teacher or adult structures a learning task and provides directives and clues using dialogue to guide the
learner’s participation in the learning task.” Teachers need to provide these directives and clues when students tackle material that is new to them or slightly beyond their knowledge base. Scaffolding helps students work in what Vygotsky called “The Zone of Proximal Development” which describes language learners’ process of moving from what they know to material that is just out of reach. They can reach higher levels of achievement than might otherwise be possible with help provided by teachers or knowledgeable peers (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p.61) just as the scaffolding allows access in the construction process.

To reach this higher level, two conditions must exist:

1. The learner must be willing to try
2. The teacher must provide a scaffold (Dixon-Krauss, L. 1996, p.61)

If these two conditions are met, the next question is to think about why the scaffold is useful. Mariani (1997) sets forth three reasons as follows:

- to clarify the purpose and give clear, step-by-step instructions
- to promote cooperative tasks so students are attuned to helping rather than competing
- to give positive affective attitude encouraging safe relationships (p. 2).

Next, a teacher must think how the challenge of the task and also, what support the students need in carrying it out. Generally a highly challenging task, which pushes a student to a higher level of development, will require careful scaffolding techniques, which are then slowly removed as the student gains competence and confidence. The type of support must be flexible because the conditions of learning are always changing. For
example, a teacher may initially offer the student a series of choices from a list, and as
the student becomes more familiar with the task, he or she will supply her own answer
and justify the choice (Mariani, 1997, p. 6). The teacher must carefully consider when the
supports are put up and when they are gradually removed.

Bradley (2004, p.1) has identified several effective types of scaffolding among which
the following are most often mentioned:

1. Simplifying language (vocabulary, grammar or length of utterance) For example
   may use present tense instead of past; avoid idioms or use partial sentences
2. Ask students to complete sentences or fill in the blank rather than having them try
to come up with the entire sentence
3. Use visuals – For example, graphic organizers, tables, outlines, graphs, pictures
4. Use gestures – establish predictable routines – ex. pointing behind to remind of
   past tense or forward for future, miming actions, etc. (Bradley, 2004, p.1).

Students are capable of mastering highly challenging material, as for example, in
content-based classes, when teachers provide purposeful, clear support in an encouraging
environment. It is important to keep in mind, however, that not all students respond to the
same type of support, so a teacher must carefully analyze the students’ learning styles and
the context for learning, and be prepared with a variety of approaches. Overall, a teacher
with the ability to reflect carefully on the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques will be
able to guide students to ever-higher levels of knowledge.

Implications:

• Use a variety of scaffolding techniques to address diverse learning styles
• Reflect on which techniques work best for the context
• Make sure tasks are suitable for the learners since scaffolding without a challenging task is not effective.

References


