

Scaffolding EFL Elementary Students to Read English Picture Storybooks

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Abstract

As reading instruction is a hot topic in education, teachers must do everything possible to make children's reading experience successful. In this paper, the researcher reports on her research project, in which she guides her pre-service teachers to teach EFL children to read English picture storybooks. The framework of scaffolded reading experience, proposed by Fitzgerald and Graves (2004), to assisting children to read was adopted. In this project, four pre-service teachers taught two classes of fourth graders for seven weeks. Each week one picture storybook was chosen and planned to teach children reading strategies and to learn English. Reading scaffolding activities and strategies activities were implemented. At the end of the project, a questionnaire was administered to enquiring into students' perceptions of learning with this reading project. The results show students find print/text as a learning aid for them to comprehend stories and learn English, they improve their reading fluency and they enjoy having the story class every week. Drawing on the conclusion, this study makes suggestions and implication for future researchers interested in applying English picture storybooks to teach in EFL elementary classrooms.

Keywords

EFL reading, scaffolded reading experience, reading strategies

1 Introduction

As reading instruction is a hot topic in education, teachers must do everything possible to make children's reading experience successful. In EFL education, as reading is scant in elementary classrooms, scaffolding students to read successfully is thus imperative. It is important that children understand what they read, enjoy the experience of reading, learn from what they read, and realize that they have learned from and understand what they read.

Recent studies of classroom reading instruction

have found that, although scaffolding is widely used by some teachers, it is not characteristic of most teachers (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). As indicated, even if it was employed, it is typically in support of word recognition. Still, comprehension instruction of any sort is much less frequent than it needs to be (Scharlach, 2008). What teachers can do to best foster students' comprehension is far from complete. However, there is virtually universal agreement that scaffolding plays an essential and vital role in fostering comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2002). As scaffolding is a complex instructional concept and takes many forms, gathering together examples and explanations of various sorts of scaffolding will help to foster its more widespread use. In this paper, the researcher hopes to help teachers construct a deeper understanding of scaffolding in EFL reading, use it more frequently in their classrooms, and thereby improve students' comprehension.

According to Scharlach's (2008) review, recently researchers have emphasized that educators must develop a motivational context for reading, provide interesting and appropriate text, and teach research-based reading comprehension strategies to increase comprehension. Based on the notion, the researcher set out her research to investigate EFL elementary students' English reading experience. In this research project, the researcher guided fourth pre-service teachers to teach EFL fourth graders to read English picture storybooks. The framework of scaffolded reading experience, proposed by Fitzgerald and Graves (2004), to assisting children to read was adopted. As indicated, "the primary goal of scaffolding reading for English learners is to help them better understand, learn from, and enjoy each and every text they read" (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004, p. 2). Fitzgerald and Graves (2004) further indicate that the scaffolded reading experience framework is especially useful when teaching English language learners and/or struggling readers. Implementing this framework to teach reading, teachers can improve their reading instruction skills,

help enhance students' reading comprehension, and increase students' reading comprehension achievement.

2 Literature review

According to Graves and Fitzgerald (2005), the scaffolded reading experience is an instructional approach to assist students in effectively reading and comprehending text. It consists of two components: planning and implementation. In planning, the teacher considers the needs of the students, the difficulty of the text, and the purposes for reading. Implementation incorporates teacher-planned lessons and activities before, during, and after reading.

The idea of scaffolding instruction as a teaching strategy originates from Vygotsky's (1978) learning theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The notion of scaffolding was first used to describe caretakers verbal interactions with their children when helping them learn how to read (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004) and can be defined as a process that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts. The ZPD refers to the range between what a child is able to do independently and what the child is able to do with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other. In scaffolding instruction, a teacher provides scaffolds or supports to facilitate students' ability to build on prior knowledge and internalize new information. According to Fitzgerald and Graves (2004), scaffolds are generally applied to all pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities. During instruction, teachers assist and guide students so that they can read, learn, and respond to text in ways they may not be able to do without support. Teachers continue to provide this support until students are able to effectively read or write independently.

According to Salsbury's review (2005), a large body of research supports scaffolding reading for English learners, showing positive effects for (a) pre-reading activities that develop students background knowledge such as the pre-teaching of vocabulary (b) during reading activities in cooperative groups, such as jigsaw readings, modified texts, learning new vocabulary from context and individual teacher-student interactions; and (c) post-reading activities designed to reinforce content and language (e.g., Beck, McKeown, Sinatra & Loxterman, 1991; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004; Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998; Rodgers, 2004; 2005).

3 Methodology

Four EFL pre-service teachers, two in a team, participated in this project to teach two classes of fourth graders. There were fifty-six students in total. The project lasted for seven weeks. Each week one picture storybook was chosen and planned to teach children reading strategies and to learn English for two consecutive periods; each period lasted for forty minutes. The pre-service teachers first selected the books and then designed the lessons. The researcher then reviewed the lessons and gave suggestions or made modifications. The chosen English picture storybooks are *Giggle Giggle Quack*, *Little Cloud*, *The Mixed-up Chameleon*, *A Good Day*, *Farmer Duck*, and *I Love My Mommy*. Each team designed three lessons and then taught their designed lessons.

In each lesson, first, STW (what do you see, what do you think, what do you wonder) was used to activate students' background knowledge and elicit students' ideas of each story. Next, modified texts, texts printed in posters, visual aids, or big books were used to present the story and help students' comprehension of each story while listening to teachers' storytelling. Third, based on the content of the story, vocabulary activities were implemented either before presenting the story or after listening to the story. Then, vocabulary practice activities were implemented to enhance students' English learning. Fourth, in each lesson, based on the content and theme, reading comprehension strategies were designed and applied to help students to interpret the story. Lastly, an extended activity such as illustrating, writing a card, unscrambling the story, or readers' theater performance was applied.

In this study, reading strategies used include STW, making predictions, making connections, reading-aloud, readers' theater, reading and writing connection, and guided writing. Scaffolding activities include using visual aids to teach students vocabulary and to enhance their learning, providing students with big books or modified texts to comprehend stories, and implementing shared reading or choral reading to increase reading fluency.

In the seventh week, the teachers gave some review activities to help recall students' memories about the learned words and stories. After the review, two vocabulary tests of selected words, each composed of twenty words from three story book, were given to the students. Later, a questionnaire was administered to enquire into students' perceptions of learning with this reading project and their English learning experience. A four-point Likert-type scale was used. Students chose their responses from strongly agree to

strongly disagree.

Some data came from the researcher’s classroom observation and discussion with the teachers after each lesson.

In this study, due to the space limitation, selected survey results were analyzed and discussed.

4 Results

Students’ responses to the questionnaire with respect to their learning experience are presented in Table 1.

First, with regard to vocabulary learning, Items 1 and 2 trigger at this aspect. Item 1 asked about students’ perceptions of the vocabulary learning activities, most of the students (87.5%) agreed the vocabulary activities such as matching the word with the corresponding picture, word search, and word formation activities helped them memorize the taught vocabulary. Next, Item 2 asked, “If the teacher teaches the new words before telling the story, will this help you comprehend the story better during storytelling?” Nearly three-fourths of the students (71.4%) agreed at this statement. Pre-teaching vocabulary will provide support for students to comprehend the story.

Table 1: Students’ Learning Results

	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Item 1	51.8%	35.7%	3.6%	7.1%
Item 2	46.4%	25.0%	17.9%	10.7%
Item 3	50%	37.5%	5.4%	7.1%
Item 4	42.9%	42.9%	8.9%	5.4%
Item 5	42.9%	41.1%	12.5%	3.6%
Item 6	48.2%	37.5%	3.6%	10.7%
Item 7	46.4%	39.3%	7.1%	7.1%
Item 8	47.3%	34.5%	10.9%	7.3%

In each lesson, the teachers would print bigger texts or modified the text on posters. Did these printed bigger texts on posters help students comprehend the story? Items 3 to 5 looked into students’ perceptions about the texts teachers used while presenting and telling the story. Students agreed (87.5%) the teacher-designed printed texts on posters helped them comprehend the story better, helped them learn English better (85.8%), and helped them understand the story the teacher presented (84%).

How did students benefit from this English reading project? Item 6 and 7 asked about this aspect. A great number of students (85.7%) agreed after this semester’s English reading class, their read-aloud ability has been improved. Also, they thought their English ability has been improved after this English reading project (Item 7).

How did students like this English reading

project? Responses to Item 8 show that most students (81.8%) like this English reading class. To sum up, students indicated positive attitudes toward the 7-week English reading project and show great improvements in learning English.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this study, the teachers have implemented the following scaffolded reading comprehension strategies: STW, making predictions, shared-reading, readers’ theater, guided writing, and making connections. Scaffolded reading experience makes EFL elementary students’ learning to read successful.

5.1 Reading fluency

First of all, during the storytelling, the teachers read to the whole class first. The teachers read to help set the pace as well as model proper pronunciation. Teachers’ read-aloud helped model fluent and expressive reading and develop comprehension. Next, as English picture storybooks were applied, the teacher were reading aloud stories that are interesting and engaging for the purpose of increasing students’ vocabulary knowledge and comprehension skills. Later, when the choral reading strategy was used, it could also help students develop appropriate intonation based on the context of the passage. Moreover, readers’ theater, used as a fun, convenient and effective way to create interest in reading among young children, was applied twice in this project. It helped develop students’ reading fluency, word recognition, and comprehension by emphasizing expressive reading and repetition.

5.2 Students’ English competence

EFL students’ English competence varies in elementary classrooms. Students are different in personality, ability, and learning styles. As such, there is no single method, theory, or set of learning materials that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must be familiar with a wide range of teaching strategies in order to create a balanced combination that will help all of their students in the classroom. Also, they need to be well versed in the subject matter to be able to provide EFL students with as many scaffolds as are needed to assist their learning.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, scaffolded reading experience benefits EFL students in reading. The implications are dynamic and carefully structured reading experiences are beneficial to all students. In this

paper, the researcher has reported one small-scale study by adopting scaffolding reading experience to teach EFL elementary students to read English picture storybooks. Scaffolding can make it possible to provide academically challenging instruction for EFL students.

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