The Role of Scaffolding in News Discussion Tasks

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The results of a quantitative study to examine the effect of scaffolding on comprehension of the content of news discussion tasks are presented in this research paper. Sixty students at a private university in Japan participated in a year-long set of news discussion tasks. The participants were members of two intact classes: a treatment group received guided scaffolding throughout the news discussion tasks, while a control group received no explicit scaffolding. At the end of the year, students completed a 20-item questionnaire on the perceived need for scaffolding, and a 20-item multiple-choice quiz based on the content covered in the news discussions. The questionnaire results revealed no significant differences between the groups. Additionally, students in the group with scaffolding demonstrated significantly higher comprehension scores than those in the group without scaffolding. The findings illustrate that students are aware of the need for scaffolding in completing news discussion tasks.

本研究では、日本の私立大学において、ニュース　ディスカッション課題の内容理解に対するスキャフォールディングの効果を調査した。60名の学生が、ふたつのグループに分かれ、1年間にわたる課題に参加した。一方のグループは、指導付きのスキャフォールディングを受け、もう一方のグループは、明示的なスキャフォールディングを受けなかった。1年の終わりに、スキャフォールディングの必要性に関する20項目のアンケートと、ニュースディスカッションで扱われた内容に基づく20項目の多肢選択式クイズを実施した。アンケートの結果、両グループ間で有意差は見られなかった。他方でスキャフォールディングを受けたグループは、受けなかったグループよりも有意に高い理解度スコアを示した。結論として、学生はニュースディスカッション課題を遂行する上で、スキャフォールディングの必要性を認識していることが明らかになった。

Scaffolding is a widely used strategy used in language learning classrooms, and can be defined as instructional support that assists learners in completing tasks that might otherwise be too overwhelming (Arora et al., 2024). It can include breaking down a task into manageable steps, or modeling strategies to more effectively understand a task's language elements, or providing regular feedback on completed tasks. Scaffolding can also include asking questions, explaining instructions, and providing vocabulary and grammar instruction. As learners become more competent in their language proficiency, scaffolding is gradually withdrawn, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. While scaffolding is considered a key component of a number of language learning approaches, some believe that it can lead to learner dependency, and can hinder the development of learner autonomy (Belland et al., 2013).

Literature Review

The role of scaffolding in language learning has been debated at great length (Anderson, 2017; Gibbons, 2015). Generally, scaffolding in language learning is planned and focuses more on accuracy in controlled language activities, in line with explicit learning (Ellis, 2003; Roehr-Brackin, 2024). In contrast, scaffolding can happen organically as tasks are being completed. In these cases, it is focused on meaning and fluency, and is more aligned with implicit learning (Kim & Godfroid, 2023; Long, 2025). Reviewing various perspectives of scaffolding allows for a broader understanding of the topic. For example, Kim and Nam (2017) found that adding a time limit to an exercise can be considered an element of implicit knowledge, as students under a time constraint are more likely to rely on implicit knowledge to complete an exercise.

A study by Buitrago (2018) investigated whether visual vocabulary scaffolding in English would be effective in benefiting an authentic foreign language task. One group of university students received a basic level of visual cues presented in English, while a second group received a more detailed and advanced set of visual cues presented in English. A discussion task followed, where some of the vocabulary terms could be used.

Responses were noted for frequency and accuracy. Follow-up surveys and interviews confirmed that the group that received more scaffolding contributed more frequently to the discussion. In addition, they were more accurate in their utterances and reported being more confident in completing the discussion task. Buitrago suggested that the role of explicit and implicit learning in the retention of task information would be a potential area for future study.

Li et al. (2018) studied the impact of pre-task explicit grammar instruction on various second language (L2) outcomes. Seventy-eight Chinese EFL learners were assigned into two groups. The first group received grammar instruction before completing two language tasks, while the second group completed the two tasks, without receiving any scaffolding. After the tasks, students completed a grammaticality judgement test and an elicited imitation test. Results showed that pre-task instruction may facilitate the learning of explicit knowledge, but not necessarily, implicit knowledge. Further research was called for on how different types of pre-task, form-focused instruction might influence L2 outcomes. Such instruction could include modeling, guided planning, and immediate feedback.

A study by Abdelshaheed (2019) looked at the effectiveness of scaffolding in improving the oral productive skills of 62 university English majors. The students were divided into two groups. While the control group received no scaffolding, the treatment group received scaffolding that included warm-up prompts, visual scaffolders (graphic organizers and charts), sequenced instructions, task modeling, summarizing, and comprehension questions. Using a pre-post test design, the researcher found that the oral skills of the students in the treatment group were significantly higher than those in the control group. This suggested that scaffolding can be an effective strategy in oral productive skills in a university setting. Abdelshaheed called for more research into which types of scaffolding are preferable to students completing tasks and wondered whether other types of scaffolding could be effective. The author also recommended that the experiment could be repeated with a larger group of students who were not necessarily English majors.

In response to the above-mentioned recommendations for additional research into the effects of scaffolding, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of various types of scaffolding on the comprehension of the content of news discussion tasks. The study addresses the calls for an examination into the effectiveness of a wide range of scaffolding strategies and additionally, includes students' perceptions of which scaffolding strategies are most useful for them. Three research questions were created in an attempt to resolve the gaps in the literature:

RQ1. What types of scaffolding do students think are necessary in completing a news discussion task?

RQ2. Will a scaffolded group perform better than a non-scaffolded group on a proficiency assessment based on a series of news discussion tasks?

RQ3. What is the relationship between performance and the perceived need for scaffolding?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 60 students from a variety of majors at a private university in Japan. The students were members of two intact EFL classes. They were first-year students in intermediate Listening and Speaking classes, corresponding to a CEFR A2 level. At the beginning of the year, the students were streamed into classes, based on the results of an in-house listening and reading proficiency test. At that time, there were no significant differences between classes in listening and reading proficiency.

One class was randomly assigned as the treatment group (n=30), which received explicit scaffolding before completing news discussion tasks, but a reduced amount of time for discussion during the tasks. The other class was assigned as the control group (n=30). This group received no explicit scaffolding while completing the same news discussion tasks. The time on task for both groups was equal.

6. research background information related to the news topic beforehand.
21. ask questions to the anchor about the news story.
22. write down key vocabulary and phrases from the news article.
23. choose the partner/group that I will work with.
24. hear a summary of the partner/group ideas from the anchor afterwards.
25. get feeback from my teacher and peers after my task is completed.

Procedure

At the beginning of the year, examples of news discussion tasks were modeled to both classes. In the examples, various types of scaffolding were introduced, and then reviewed

using example exercises that included previewing news stories beforehand, grammar and/or vocabulary previews, topic familiarity previews, warm-up questions, showing the stories in one or both languages, listening to the news presentations at a slower pace or with simplified language, or modeling the task. Various types of scaffolding were explained to all students as possible ways to improve learning outcomes (as recommended by Walqui & van Lier, 2020).

Throughout the year, each student was assigned to present a news story for one class, and to moderate a news discussion task among the rest of the students. Before their assigned class, each student (called the *anchor* of the day) found a news story from any source for homework. They prepared a three-sentence summary of the story and chose a relevant interactive discussion task related to the story which could include role plays, giving advice, ranking, justifying an opinion, information gap tasks, or ordering tasks. For example, one story that was covered during the year was the Shohei Ohtani translator scandal. That story was ideal for a role play where one person would be Ohtani and the other, his translator.

At the beginning of each class, the anchor wrote the headline and the discussion task up on the board. For the treatment group only, the anchor choose an appropriate scaffolding strategy for the task from the scaffolding examples shown to the class at the beginning of the year. For both groups, the anchor then presented a summary of the news story and introduced the discussion task to the class. They gave partners/groups time to work on the discussion tasks. The anchor then elicited responses from partners/groups and summarized the class ideas. The steps and timing of the tasks for the control group and the treatment group are summarized in Table 1.

In short, the only difference between the procedure for the groups was the time spent on scaffolding and the discussion task. The treatment group had five minutes devoted to a scaffolding strategy, and five minutes for the task, to focus on the accuracy of their understanding of the presentation and the task. In contrast, the control group had no explicit scaffolding, but ten minutes to complete the news discussion tasks, to spend more time on developing language fluency through the task.

Table 1

Summary of Steps and Timing of the News Discussion Tasks

Steps	Details of Steps	Control Group	Treatment Group
Scaffolding	Students complete a scaffolding task	--	5
News summary	Anchor presents a summary of the news story	1	1
Task explanation	Anchor describes the discussion task explanation	1	1
News discussion task	Partners/groups work on news discussion task	10	5
Elicit responses	Anchor elicits responses after task is completed	3	3
Total time on task	Anchor manages total time on task	15	15

Note. (Number) = denotes number of minutes.

Materials

Questionnaire

During the last week of the school year, a 20-item questionnaire presented in English and Japanese was administered to the 60 students. A questionnaire was used to best understand learners' perspectives and values on the issue (recommended by Dornyei & Taguchi, 2009). The questionnaire investigated the students' perceived need for various types of scaffolding. Based on the results of a previously piloted questionnaire, all items on the questionnaire were written by the author. The 20 items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, to avoid the temptation of choosing the middle option. The 20 items appeared in four different versions of the questionnaire with the items in different orders (see Appendix). This was to minimize bias against items that appeared closer to the beginning or the end.

Quiz

A 20-item multiple-choice quiz with a 20-minute time limit was then administered to both groups. The quiz and the questionnaire were printed on opposite sides of the

same pages to allow linking of the students' responses, while keeping their identities anonymous. The quiz was based on content covered in the news articles common to both groups, for quiz comparability purposes. The items were original and created by the author. As it was important that the students themselves were able to choose the news stories, the two classes did not always cover the same stories. For example, the *protests in France* story was covered only by the treatment group. *Osaka Naomi's pregnancy* was covered only by the control group. As a result, these stories were not covered in the quiz. The *missing Titanic submersible* story was covered in both classes, so was included on the quiz. Only the following stories, which were covered by both classes, were included on the quiz:

1. Noto earthquake aftermath
2. Abe assassination and the Unification Church
3. Shohei Ohtani move to LA Dodgers
4. Pipe bomb attack on Kishida
5. G7 Summit held in Hiroshima
6. China bans Japanese seafood
7. Ichikawa Ennosuke arrested after parents' death
8. Johnny Kitagawa's abusive past
9. Kishida's son forced to resign
10. Ginza luxury watch heist
11. Plane crash at Haneda
12. Behavior at conveyor belt restaurants
13. Japan slips to 125 on the Gender Gap Index
14. Trump denies hiding classified documents
15. Titanic-bound submersible missing
16. Wildfires around the world
17. Chinese spy balloon worries
18. Number of shark attacks increasing
19. Russian invasion of Ukraine
20. The impact of the AR-15's force on the US
21. Alaska Airlines aircraft loses a door
22. Report shows worldwide coral bleaching
23. 700 migrants drown in boat crossing
24. Climate change conference held in Dubai

The prompt of each item on the quiz was a quotation from one of the news stories covered during the year. The distractors were headlines from five of the news stories that were covered. Students were instructed to choose the correct headline that that matched the quotation. A typical item in the quiz follows:

1. "The removal of buildings has not progressed, hindering the recovery efforts of residents."
   a. Plane crash at Haneda
   b. Russian invasion of Ukraine
   c. Wildfires around the world
   d. Noto earthquake aftermath
   e. The Impact of the AR-15 in the US

Ethical Considerations

Permission for conducting this study was granted by the university at the beginning of the academic year. In addition, the purpose of the study was explained to the students at that time. An informed consent form in English and Japanese was distributed with the questionnaire and the quiz. Participants read the information, signed and submitted it separately. The consent form reviewed the purpose of the study to the participants. It specified that the questionnaire and quiz were: anonymous, optional, to be completed outside of class, and did not affect the students' grades. No students chose to opt out of the study.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire

The Rasch rating scale model (Andrich, 1978) was used to confirm the questionnaire items measuring the students' perceptions of the need for various types of scaffolding strategies. In addition, the Rasch rating scale model was employed to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the questionnaire items.

The infit MNSQ and outfit MNSQ statistics were used to determine the suitability of student responses. Infit MNSQ is an inlier-sensitive statistic that can detect unexpected responses of persons whose ability is closer to the item's difficulty level. In contrast, outfit MNSQ is outlier-sensitive and can overfit for responses that are more orderly than expected, or underfit for correct guesses on difficult items or mistakes on easy items. As MNSQ statistics are context-dependent, a formula developed by Pollitt and Hutchinson (1987) specified a range of plus or minus two standard deviations of the infit and outfit MNSQ statistics. This formula was considered most appropriate for this study, as it is an industry standard used in many Rasch analysis studies (Rush & O'Neill, 2008).

As a result of the analysis, no items or persons were deleted, as all were within the acceptable fit statistics. Both the Rasch item reliability and separation statistics were excellent at .98 and 7.92, respectively. The Rasch person reliability and separation estimates were very good at .94 and 3.19, respectively.

A Wright map was generated and illustrated a normal distribution of items. Items that were easy to endorse, that is, students tended to prefer these scaffolding strategies, included having the teacher model the task, preview vocabulary, getting feedback, and summarized group ideas after the task was completed. On the other hand, there were items that were difficult to endorse, meaning that students did not see much use in relying on Japanese translations, or adjusting the language or speed of the news presentations.

Quiz

The Rasch rating model (Andrich, 1978) was also used to analyze the quiz items because of its ability to assess the validity and reliability of the items. It can measure whether the items are functioning consistently at different levels of student abilities.

Two misfitting student responses were identified. Person A08 and Person B30 both fell outside the acceptable fit statistics (Infit MNSQ = 1.74; Outfit MNSQ = 3.04 and Infit MNSQ = 1.63; Outfit MNSQ = 2.70, respectively). Both persons were subsequently deleted, and the analysis was repeated with 29 persons in each of the two groups. All items were found to be within acceptable fit statistics. Both the Rasch item reliability and separation statistics were very good at .91 and 3.19, respectively. The Rasch person reliability and separation estimates were acceptable at .80 and 1.99, respectively.

A Wright map was generated and indicated a normal person distribution. It was slightly skewed, probably indicating that the quiz was easy for many of the students. It was clear that the items were divided into three bands of difficulty. Items that were difficult to endorse, meaning difficult quiz items, included Q8 (Uvalde school shooting), Q3 (China bans Japanese seafood), and Q19 (Number of shark attacks increasing). Items that were easy to endorse included Q16 (Behavior problems at conveyor belt restaurants), Q12 (Wildfires around the world), and Q7 (Plane crash at Haneda airport).

Relationship Between the Perceived Need for Scaffolding and Performance

In order to investigate the relationship between the perceived need for scaffolding and performance, the correlation between the questionnaire results and the quiz scores was investigated. A Pearson correlation was used to assess the relationship. This statistic is commonly used in educational research to evaluate the strength and direction of an association (Schober et al., 2018). The results will be discussed in the next section.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question examined what types of scaffolding students perceived as important in being able to complete a news discussion task. According to the questionnaire results, students preferred more practical scaffolding strategies, including having the teacher model the task, previewing vocabulary, getting feedback from the teacher and their peers, and summarizing group ideas. Students were less interested in working from Japanese translations, simplifying the language of the news stories, or slowing down the speed of the news presentations.

To investigate whether there were any differences in the scaffolding preferences between the control group and the treatment group, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups ($t(58) = 1.23$, $p = .224$). This indicates that, regardless of whether students had scaffolding in their news discussion tasks or not, they were aware of the scaffolding strategies that would help them complete the tasks successfully.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 investigated whether or not the group that received scaffolding in their news discussion tasks would perform better than the non-scaffolded group on a proficiency assessment based on the content of news discussion tasks. To determine if any differences in performance existed between the control and treatment groups, an independent sample t-test was used to compare the quiz results of the two groups.

A statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups was found ($t(58) = -2.398$, $p = .020$), with the treatment group scoring significantly higher on average. This indicates that the group that had scaffolding strategies before each of the news discussion tasks had a better understanding of the content of the news stories, compared to the non-scaffolded group.

Research Question 3

The final research question assessed the relationship between performance and the perceived need for scaffolding, by comparing the results of the questionnaire and the quiz. A Pearson correlation showed that the student means of questionnaire and the quiz items were found to have a strong negative correlation ($r(56) = -.73$, $p < .01$). This indicates that a student who did well on the quiz benefited from the scaffolding activities in the discussion tasks, but might be more likely to have less need for scaffolding by the time the quiz was administered by the end of the year. Conversely, a student who did poorly on the quiz would more likely feel that they would continue to benefit from scaffolding activities.

Discussion

The objective of the study was to research the effectiveness of scaffolding in a series of news discussion tasks. The study addresses a number of concerns and opportunities related to the role of scaffolding in news discussion tasks.

First, as the findings for research question 1 suggest, regardless of whether students received scaffolding in the discussion tasks, they were cognizant of which strategies would assist them in completing the task, echoing the findings of Fang and Lui (2022). In particular, students from both groups felt that watching a teacher model a task, previewing vocabulary, and getting feedback from peers and teachers would be beneficial. It is interesting to note that both previewing and feedback strategies take place just before or after the task is completed. On the other hand, there were scaffolding strategies that students did not favor. Students may have realized the pedagogical value in not relying on Japanese translations, or not adjusting the language or speed of the news presentations. This finding is an important reminder to teachers that students are often independent enough to advocate for their own learning needs, similar to the findings of Afitska (2016).

Secondly, in terms of research question 2, it is important to point out that explicit and implicit knowledge are two different types of linguistic proficiency. Explicit knowledge focuses on accuracy, and includes elements like grammar, vocabulary, and planned language interactions. It is often a result of formal instruction (Roehr-Brackin, 2024). In contrast, implicit knowledge is more connected to fluency and spontaneous language use (Kim & Godfroid, 2023). It should be clarified that the items on the quiz focused on students' explicit, rather than implicit knowledge of the content. Expanding on the findings by Kim and Nam (2017), some argument could be made that the 20-minute time limit also assessed implicit knowledge, in that under a time constraint, students are more likely to rely on automatic, intuitive, or implicit knowledge to complete a task. Alternatively, implicit knowledge might also be better assessed in future studies using a timed speaking activity, based on the content of the news discussion tasks.

In research question 3, a strong negative correlation was found between the quiz performance and the perceived need for scaffolding, expanding on the findings by Abdelshaheed (2019). While scaffolding benefitted students who performed well on the quiz, by the end of the year their need for as much scaffolding is reduced. These students would still benefit from tailored scaffolding, customized for their particular needs. However, continued scaffolding is still vital to those students who did not perform as well on the quiz.

In short, in line with the findings of Belland (2017), scaffolding can provide students with meaningful strategies to develop competence and allows students to develop confidence and autonomy. It can also help students to develop their cognitive skills, as they can manage tasks with increasing complexity. As a result, scaffolding can encourage more participation in class discussion tasks. However, some researchers have hinted that excessive scaffolding can have less than optimal effects. It can lead to a dependence on using scaffolding strategies, or reduce spontaneous and creative language production (Belland et al., 2013). In addition, in line with the findings of Fang and Liu (2022), personalized, tailored scaffolding is often sacrificed in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach in mixed-ability classes.

Limitations

Three limitations to the study should be mentioned. First, self-reported data risks the chance of over- or under-reporting, due to a number of external factors. While questionnaires are, by nature, self-reported, any results should still be noted with caution. Secondly, while sample sizes of 30 or more are considered sufficient for statistical analysis, the results should be viewed with caution due to the relatively low number of students ($n = 60$) in the study. Additionally, the students in this study were

at an intermediate level. The study should be repeated on a larger scale and include students with various levels of language proficiency. Finally, the news discussion tasks in this study were limited to 15 minutes per class, due to standardized syllabi constraints. It is possible that the linguistic benefits of the task, as well as the results of the study, might have been more robust, if the duration of the tasks had been longer, in line with the findings by Nilsson et al. (2023).

Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study have highlighted a number of pedagogical implications. First, the study illustrates that students have specific scaffolding preferences. As a result, incorporating task modeling, vocabulary and grammar previews, and meaningful feedback, among others, into discussion tasks can be personalized to match learning needs. In addition, echoing the ideas put forth in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, educators can be mindful that as students develop confidence and competence in language proficiency, scaffolding strategies can be slowly be reduced, with the understanding that learners rarely get to a point where no scaffolding is needed. The timing of when the strategies should be reduced, as well as which strategies, is an issue that educators should manage carefully. Finally, assigning news discussion tasks can give educators a way to explore the accuracy goals of explicit knowledge and the fluency goals of implicit knowledge, in tandem.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how students perceived the need for scaffolding in completing a series of news discussion tasks. The results of the questionnaire highlighted the role and effectiveness of scaffolding in language learning. It also demonstrated that students had preferences for certain types of scaffolding over others. At the beginning of the year, various types of scaffolding were introduced and practiced with news discussion task examples with students from both groups. The questionnaire results illustrated that students were aware what types of scaffolding they preferred, whether they received scaffolding in the following discussion tasks or not. The results of the quiz showed that scaffolding had a postive effect on explicit knowledge. Finally, the strong negative correlation between the questionnaire and the quiz provided evidence that students with higher performance scores had less need for scaffolding. Conversely, students with lower quiz performances expressed a need for scaffolding in their tasks. Scaffolding may be a highly effective tool used to support language learners, but it should be used carefully, with the goal of being eventually removed to avoid dependence and foster autonomy. Balancing scaffolding with opportunities for independent language proficiency is key.

Biodata

Ferg Hann has lived in Tokyo for the last nine years and teaches at Tokai University. He has also taught English at the university level in the U.A.E., Egypt, and South Korea.

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Appendix

Student Questionnaire (English version)

News Discussion Task Questionnaire:

1. Class:
2. Date of news discussion task you presented:
3. Topic of news discussion task you presented:
4. Source and date of news article:
5. News article URL:

To understand the news discussion tasks better, I need to:

Check the most appropriate response (from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree, or Strongly Agree)

6. Research background information related to the news topic beforehand.
7. Preview the english version of the news story beforehand.
8. Preview the Japanese version of the news story beforehand.
9. Preview vocabulary related to the topic beforehand.
10. Preview grammar structure in the news story beforehand.
11. Read the content of the news presentation in both languages beforehand.
12. Practice reading the news articles aloud beforehand.
13. Watch and hear the teacher model the presentation and discussion tasks.
14. Discuss a warm-up question with a partner before the presentation.
15. Listen to the news presentation at a slower pace.
16. Listen to the news presentation with simplified language.
17. See the news story projected onto a screen during the presentation.
18. Repeat the main points of the story with my partner after the summary.
19. Read or listen to the news report multiple times.
20. Take notes on the news story during the presentation.
21. Ask questions to the anchor about the news story.
22. Write down key vocabulary and phrases from the news article.
23. Choose the partner/group that I will work with.

24. Hear a summary of the partner/group ideas from the anchor afterwards.
25. Get feedback from my teacher and peers after my task is completed.