

Teacher Learning in a Virtual Field Experience

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Abstract: This study aims to explore how teaching assistants (TAs) respond to students' written texts through a virtual field experience. Five prospective teachers served as TAs to revise 20 college student writers' texts in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in an online virtual field experience. This study draws on the notions of hard and soft scaffolds to conceptualize the way TAs provide and reflect on their written support. It was found that TAs' preconceptions of effective scaffolding in text revision were challenged and reexamined. An online virtual field experience nurtured teacher learning with efficient support.

Keywords: Teacher Learning, Teaching Assistants, Virtual field experience

1. Introduction

This study draws on the notions of *hard and soft scaffolds* (Brush & Saye, 2002; Saye & Brush, 2002) to theorize support and assistance that teachers provide to develop students' writing skills. Saye and Brush (2002) advocate that the nature of scaffolds should be individualized. It can be referred to as a number of instructional strategies to facilitate learning processes. Useful scaffolding is used to bridge the gap between what learners can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with the aid of capable actors such as teachers, adults, or peers (Beed, Hawkins, & Roller, 1991; Raymond, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). The capable actors must tap into learners' actual developmental levels at first and then provide the support slightly beyond the learners' current level so as to make the instruction more accessible to learners. Scaffolding can then be withdrawn when learners gain the competence over their learning (Beed, Hawkins, & Roller, 1991). The ultimate goal of scaffolding is to develop students to be autonomous learners who can apply what they've learned previously to accomplish similar tasks on their own (Rogoff & Gardener, 1984). Along the same line, teacher written feedback scaffolds students to become independent writers through raising their awareness of grammar usages and writing conventions.

To address effective scaffolds that support both teaching and learning, Brush and Saye (2002) reconceptualize scaffolding as *soft and hard scaffolds*. Soft scaffolds are defined as "dynamic, situation-specific aid provided by a teacher or peer to help with the learning process" (Brush & Saye, 2002, p. 2). This form of support requires teachers to assess students' current level of writing ability and meet their immediate learning needs (Saye & Brush, 2002). Rather than a one-size-fits-all strategy, soft scaffolds focus on support at one particular moment in time: teachers ask for clarification, request information, and correct grammatical mistakes throughout the student writing process.

Hard scaffolds refer to the "static support that can be anticipated and planned in advance based upon typical student difficulties with a task" (Brush & Saye, 2002, p. 2). This assistance is framed ahead when teachers have identified student writers' difficulties and types of effective comments as opposed to randomly underlining every word and sentence. In this present research, TAs analyzed both students'

revised drafts and evaluations to explore their feedback practice and change. The virtual field experience assists prospective teachers to transform their personal beliefs, knowledge, and experience in scaffolding to facilitate actual learning (Pence & Macgillivray, 2007). When TAs identify gaps between their teaching assumptions and current students' needs, hard scaffolds can be forged to develop new understandings of written support.

In this study, an online writing system is developed to provide the virtual field experience for prospective teachers to serve as teaching assistants (TAs) who scaffolded students through multiple writing stages. In this study, student writers (SWs) were required to write an essay and posted it online for TAs to comment on. After student writers posted their first drafts, TAs were arranged to correct and respond to students' essays. Student writers were encouraged to evaluate how helpful TAs' corrections and comments were and rated them based upon a 5-point scale. Finally, each student writer revised his/her original essay according to TAs' suggestions and reposted it. TAs used student writers' evaluation to examine the effectiveness of their scaffolding.

According to the retrospective interviews, five TAs all appreciated the virtual field experience in which their preconceptions of effective scaffolding in text revision were challenged and reexamined. The TAs' reinterpretations of their scaffolding resulted from their observations on the student writers' revision process and evaluations on the TAs' comments and corrections. By observing student writers' revision process, the TAs evaluated whether their corrections and comments could effectively scaffold student writers to revise their texts. From the students' evaluations, the TAs could check whether student writers encountered difficulty in understanding the TAs' comments and corrections. The TAs started to think as student writers to explore the reasons why their student writers could not benefit from their scaffolding and what scaffolding student writers really needed in the revision process. If TAs were not provided with the opportunity to reexamine the effectiveness of the scaffolding by checking students' responses and revised texts, they could never recognize the importance of guiding students to think independently, analyze students' language proficiency levels, and encourage students to express personal viewpoints and voices in their reaction essays.

Through ongoing reciprocal examinations of their prior and new preconceptions of scaffolding, prospective teachers learn to develop as professionals (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Particularly, online learning environment conceals the student participants' identities, so their perceptions of feedback usefulness may be more candid in helping TAs reflect on their commentary behaviors and further examine their teaching assumptions and current student's needs. The students' revised texts and their feedback evaluation provide opportunities for TAs to identify soft scaffolds—situated support and pedagogical intervention that the student writers need. More importantly, the online feedback submission promotes interactions between the students and TAs who dialogue what constitutes effective feedback. Then, TAs can draw upon these inputs to formulate their hard scaffolds—pre-planned instructions by anticipating learners' difficulties and challenges (Brush & Saye, 2002; Saye & Brush, 2002). When the TAs found that they should identify their students' background knowledge and select common errors, these types of assistances could specifically tap into learning-to-write processes and become TAs' pedagogical knowledge.

Appropriately developed computer-mediated tools increase opportunities to achieve instructional goals. As the purpose of teacher feedback is to help students become independent writers and improve their writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), future research can include in what way in-service teachers experience online feedback practice and examine similarities and differences between traditional and computer-assisted approaches. The effect of feedback provided in different teaching and learning environments on student writing can be also addressed in further studies.

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