

Instructional Scaffolding for **Reading** *Journal* **Writing**

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Many a time ESL students get stuck in their writing assignment with no clue of what to do next. In such a dilemma, the teacher's timely assistance can be of great help in their overcoming the block. Jerome Brunner (1976) called this assistance scaffolding that guides the students to the next step level, demonstrating both cognitive and affective strategies. It is like helping a baby learn to walk. Moreover, instructional scaffolding can be a means to promote learner autonomy since it is done only when necessary until, and it allows enough room for students to grow independently. This paper discusses how teachers can help their students cope with such a sticky situation and facilitate their writing assignment through the use of the instructional scaffolding.

In Assumption University, where all undergraduate students must study four compulsory English courses, two of which are known as English I and II, students are required to read three books of their choice from a list of eight books of intermediate and upper intermediate levels respectively during the first term as extensive reading. Giving choices makes them responsible for their own learning apart from enjoying the books of their interest. The extensive reading is aimed at training students to become more autonomous in learning English as a foreign language and instilling the love of reading in students. To assess their reading skill, students do reading journal writings in class instead of 'formal testing, which can be damaging because some students may resort to cheating' (Nuttall 1996: 143). It is not practical either since they read different books. To make the extensive reading program effective, the assessment should not be a mere written test of recalling the story line, but there should be learning opportunities to improve their reading and thinking skills and to write creatively. To enhance their intrinsic motivation, they can also choose the topic they would like to work on for the reading journal writing. In addition, as incentives, intermediate and upper intermediate level students can read two additional books and write two reading journals for bonus marks.

When reading journal writing was first introduced to the English I and II curriculum, some in my classes just wrote summary-like entries on whatever topic or questions they chose; others might not be clear with the appropriate focus of the entry. The feedback on their finished products alone did not seem to work, since I still found similar entries later in the semester. To remedy this, the only effective way I have found, is to provide assistance when necessary. In the beginning, reading journal writing was just used to see whether students had done the required extensive reading. Actually, reading journal writing sessions are among the most appropriate time to give students learning opportunities to write several genres of creative writing, while learning to improve their reading skills. There are opportunities for teachers to make the reading-writing connection visible through instructional

scaffolding, which can be enhanced by giving feedback during writing. Learning from the experience of the previous semester, genre is first dealt with before giving appropriate scaffolding for the writing process and feedback during the writing. As a result the quality of the product has been much better in terms of content, organization, genre, and the use of pronouns.

Instructional scaffolding as a tool to make reading-writing connection more visible

Research suggests that reading and writing together engages students in a greater use and variety of cognitive strategies than reading and writing taught separately. Teacher's demonstration and students' practice of cognitive strategies together promote and enhance critical thinking skills. Olson (2003: 16) supports research indicating that reading and writing in combination have the potential to contribute in powerful ways to thinking. Reading journal writing, used as assessment of extensive reading programs, makes students aware of the strong connection between reading and writing.

Apart from improving reading skills, reading journal writings offer a very good opportunity to learn the different genres of critical and creative writing, while revisiting some part of the stories. The genres include characterization, comparison and contrast of two characters, advantages and disadvantages of a system, a news report, a diary entry, feelings, thoughts and recollections of a character, predicting the future of a character, a letter of a character to another in the story, etc. Such tasks require thinking and writing critically and creatively, while improving their reading skills.

When reading, students are more concerned with the meaning. On the other hand, when writing reading journals, they have to think of the overall framework, revisit some parts of the text and monitor their own progress in order to move forward. They have to attend to not only the content and language, but organization and focus of the entry. Evidently, they have to use a variety of cognitive strategies in the process of writing.

The reading/writing connection can be made visible through instructional scaffolding during the process of writing. According to Lynch (1996:148), there has been an increasing interest in the process of writing since the 1970's and this approach is more concerned with 'going about it the right way'. To help students overcome cognitive, linguistic, communicative and affective constraints, the most appropriate time to provide feedback as a part of instructional scaffolding is during writing instead of waiting for the final draft. This process-oriented approach supports students to produce better quality final products, which is by no means less important than the process.

Making Instructional Scaffolding effective

Instructional scaffolding is defined as support for learning and problem solving. The support could be clues, reminders, encouragement, breaking the problem into steps, providing an example or anything else that allows the students to grow in independence as a learner (Woolfolk 1998:47). Student readers and writers may have too many constraints, and the 'cognitive overload' can strain students' intellectual abilities. The purpose of scaffolding is to reduce the constraints of student readers and writers so that the task in hand becomes more manageable. In support of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (scaffolding promotes transfer

of cognitive process to learners), Olson (2003: 16) recommends that through the repeated modeling of adults and through successive opportunities to practice, students eventually internalize language structures and strategies that they can access and apply as autonomous learners.

To make instructional scaffolding effective in reading and writing classes, we need to reinforce its five principles: ownership, appropriateness, structure, collaboration, and internalization (Olson 2003: 20, 350).

First and foremost, to make instructional scaffolding effective we must give students a sense of *ownership*. To achieve this, there must be some element of choice in selecting the story as well as the task, and room to discuss their own interpretation of their self-selected stories. Explaining the topics and questions that require students to write creatively offers opportunities to interpret things in the story. Moreover, research indicates that the student's choice of reading material and the task enhances intrinsic motivation and a sense of responsibility.

Another principle of effective instructional scaffolding Olson discusses is *appropriateness*. We should select tasks that build upon students' existing reading, thinking and writing abilities and that will stretch students intellectually. Since students can choose the story and the topic for the reading journal writing, their choice is likely to be manageable at their independent level. The teacher's job is to make sure that the students are not frustrated, but motivated to accomplish the task with appropriate help.

It is also necessary to make the *structure* of the task clear and guide the individual through the task so that they can apply the cognitive strategies in other contexts (Olson 2003:20). As the topics require them to think and write critically or creatively, providing models of what is expected will enable them to apply the strategies in new contexts. It helps to write a sample sentence about the journal topic on a transparency.

In addition, effective instructional scaffolding also promotes *collaboration* among students and between students and the teacher so that knowledge can be constructed and shared interactively (Olson 2003:20). Some students read the same story and like to work together. Through interaction between the teacher and the group and among the group members, meaning can be constructed and shared collaboratively. Consequently, students can learn how to negotiate complex reading and writing tasks from the teacher and the group members.

The ultimate goal of instructional scaffolding is the transfer of control from the teacher to the students as the students demonstrate that they have internalized the strategies and can apply them in a new context as autonomous learners (Olson 2003:395). At the beginning of the semester, it takes quite a lot of time and effort to guide students to use appropriate cognitive strategies. Gradually in later reading journal writing classes, things get easier. The strategies learnt through scaffolding are ultimately expected to be internalized so they can apply those strategies independently. It takes time to achieve the primary goal of instructional scaffolding; that is, *internalization*, but it is rewarding to see students apply the strategies in new tasks. The teachers with a huge class of mixed proficiency will find this instructional means helpful and accommodating.

Conclusion

Conducting reading journal writing classes can be a challenging teaching task since it requires interactions with individual students and an appropriate guidance and help for each and everyone to sail through the different tasks at hand. A teacher's facilitating role is all the more true in this case. It is the class where students like to ask questions much more than any other classes, as they need immediate help. However, discretion in providing help is necessary so that the writing task makes sense and can bring about the expected results. Instructional scaffolding is a worthwhile method that benefits both teachers and learners.

References:

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