

Using Scaffolding to Improve Online Group Presentation in English Literature Classes: An Action Study at Van Lang University

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to examine the use of scaffolding to improve online group-work presentations in English literature classes. Different stages of action research such as planning, acting, observation, and reflection are described in detail. Three scaffolding activities (questioning, feedback, and providing digital resources) were used in this present study. Qualitative analysis reveals that teachers' scaffolding activities were found to be useful in supporting students' online presentation of literary texts. Specifically, it was found that teacher and peer feedback scaffolding played an important role in helping learners better understand literary texts. Another finding is that, on the one hand, questioning encouraged learners to explore different aspects of literary works. Providing resources, on the other hand, has a practical impact in helping learners out of frustration in searching for pertinent facts about the presentation tasks. The study can be a useful source of reference in teaching English literature online, especially in a multimodal learning environment.

Introduction

Scaffolding learners' skills acquisition is not new. However, in Vietnam, there are still very few studies on this issue, especially those related to scaffolding activities to support learners in their step-by-step implementation of English literature presentations. In the Vietnamese context in which English is used as a foreign language (EFL), learners in English Literature classes often encounter challenges in using English to present a prepared talk on a certain topic in English Literature. Apart from possessing good knowledge of the presentation topic, learners need to acquire an adequate level of language proficiency, adequate presentation and literary interpretation skills, adequate interpersonal and collaborative skills, and good psychological qualities. It is even more challenging for learners to perform their tasks in an online learning environment because they also need to develop the ability to use interactive multimedia resources such as PowerPoint presentations, graphics, animations, and videos to verbally

present their assignments (Mahdi, 2022; Fauzi, 2016). In the local context, this issue remains underexplored. Pham et al. (2022) also highlighted the importance of making an effective presentation via MS Teams. In addition, Nguyen (2022) has asserted that computer-based activities should be developed as a helpful way to improve students' speaking and presentation skills. Moreover, research by Phan et al. (2022) focused on investigating students' online learning conditions with the aim of finding the factors affecting their fluency in their speaking skills. This could be considered as a scaffolding to develop students' oral presentation skills. This present study attempts to bridge this gap by investigating the effectiveness of scaffolding in improving online group presentation in English literature classes at Van Lang University.

Literature review

The definition of scaffolding

Scaffolding is the process involving teachers' temporary assistance and guidance that help learners reach a higher stage or level in developing new skills and understanding complex concepts. Without such necessary assistance, learners could not accomplish their learning tasks independently (Gibbons, 2015).

The conceptual framework of scaffolding proposed by Spycher (2017) consists of the following stages: 1) Scaffolding vocabulary, structure, and content; 2) Composing, and 3) Evaluation and feedback. This present study uses these stages as components of the conceptual framework for an online group presentation in English literature classes, except for a slight modification in the composition stage which involves both composing and presenting.

This adapted framework is appropriate for teaching online group presentations because, in each stage, learners may have problems with English communication skills and literary interpretation skills. They can be discouraged and less confident about not being able to use the English language effectively to perform their tasks. The discouragement and lack of confidence might take away their inspiration to explore the literary work. In this case, teachers must help their students prepare, organize, and deliver their presentations. Teachers' support can be in many different forms. This present study explores the effectiveness of the following forms of support or scaffolding.

Types of scaffolding used

The first type is a teacher and peer feedback. It is considered an effective tool to help learners share ideas and knowledge and improve their language skills. This has been documented in earlier research (e.g., Yawiloeng, 2021). Chairinkam & Yawiloeng (2021) stated that peer scaffolding could assist learners in overcoming any problems they may encounter while engaging in English writing activities. Furthermore, peer scaffolding can help learners to reach a higher level of language performance.

The second type of scaffolding used in this study is questioning. Questions have been studied as interactive teaching features in classroom settings but not used as a pedagogical tool to teach the presentation genre to exploit its rhetorical and interpersonal potential. Rafael & Carmen (2015) suggest that questioning should be incorporated into teaching group presentations. Questions could frame the presentation: initially to brainstorm ideas and concepts and thus establish a common ground of shared knowledge, and finally as a comprehension check. Iannelli (2016) emphasized how questioning techniques positively affect students' comprehension of informational text. Questioning is considered a powerful strategy to check students' comprehension of literary works. Different from fact-based questions, which can only be given when students deliver a large amount of information, interpretive questions can also be produced after students have a better understanding of the literary work. This type of question is open-ended, requiring deep thought and critical thinking. Interpretive questions usually start with "why" or "how" to explore the beauty, the themes, and the author's implication. In order to answer these questions, students should combine both their critical thinking and textbooks or other information sources locating, which enables them to remember the lesson and the literary work longer. When students are exposed to these questions, it would be easier for them to find out the tone of the literary work as well as its thematic pattern.

The third type of scaffolding explored in this study was the use of online resources. Despite the fact that there is a significant number of studies dealing with students' perceptions of the use of digital vs. print resources, no study has focused on how students perceive the potentialities of digital collections. As Roig-Marín and Prieto (2021) noted, the only exception is Guzmán-Simón et al. (2017) research into undergraduate students' perspectives on digital competence. Exposure to a large number of online resources might make learners overwhelmed and confused when selecting reliable resources for their presentation. By providing useful information resources, learners are able to access more accurate and useful facts about the work. This is especially meaningful to those who have to memorize accurate facts about authors and their works. With the useful and reliable information resources suggested by the teacher, learners could set their minds at rest when designing their presentations. These sources also serve as a tool for helping students improve their generalization skills, which is essential in making presentations focused.

This present study aims to examine the effectiveness of scaffolding intervention in assisting learners in their online literature presentations. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were employed:

1. How can teacher and peer feedback enhance learners' presenting performance?
2. How can the use of questioning enhance learners' presenting performance?
3. How can the use of relevant online resources improve the quality of learners' PowerPoint presentations?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

This study was carried out at Van Lang University (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam). The participants were third-year English-majored students in K24N classes taught by the researcher. The total number of students participating in the study is 140. These students have completed the subjects of English language skills and language knowledge, and their English proficiency is at the B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The English literature program at Van Lang University consists of 30 periods, equivalent to 2 credits. The program content has two components: literary theories and selected authors and their works. The theory component takes one credit, including 15 lessons taught directly in class or through online software MS Team and 30 hours of self-study with guidance. The practical component consists of 30 practice periods and 15 hours for students to self-study with guidance. There are two self-study sessions through videos posted by the lecturer on the school's e-learning site, where students are required to watch videos and do exercises. The program is designed to enhance students' sense of self-study and self-exploration.

The objective of the course is to help English majors at Van Lang University acquire basic knowledge of the history of English literature, master basic literary genres, as well as understand selected authors and typical works. Through self-study and class presentations, students will develop the ability to find and analyze information in the study of English literature, increase confidence when presenting their prepared task in class and improve their group-work ability.

In terms of learning materials, the textbooks are internally compiled, mainly focusing on introducing the development stages of English literature over time. This theoretical part only focuses on introducing some typical authors and works corresponding to each period. In each lesson, students are assigned to read at home in advance to prepare for the next class. Corresponding to each literary period, students also learn a typical literary work for that period.

Design of the Study

This study used action research as a method to examine the effectiveness of scaffolding to improve online group presentation in English literature classes at Van Lang University.

The study involved action, evaluation, and reflection. Evidence was gathered to implement changes in practices. Specifically, the following processes were utilized to some extent:

- ✓ Plan a change;
- ✓ Take action to enact the change;
- ✓ Observe the process and consequences of the change;
- ✓ Reflect on the process and consequences;
- ✓ Act, observe, and reflect again.

For the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022, the teacher followed the adapted scaffolding framework to comply with the course syllabus. Students had one week to prepare for their presentation and were encouraged to search other sources for supplementary information. In each 3-hour lesson, the group in charge of the theory part presented in PowerPoint the historical and social elements of British society, as well as the featured authors and their works. After each presentation, questioning and feedback were made by the teacher and their peers so that students could have a better understanding of the literary work. Students related the issues in work to their personal experiences. Students were also encouraged to explore the beauty of the work in terms of entertainment and artistic perspective.

Data collection & analysis

Two data collection instruments were used: (1) students' presentations and their reflections; (2) teacher and peer feedback.

The first instrument is the students' presentation and reflection. After each presentation, students in other groups were allowed to ask at least two questions related to the presentation. These questions were sent to the Meeting Chat - one of the two main interaction channels of MS Teams software. The presentation group answered questions directly using the speaker, so everyone in the class could hear. The students' answers were texted and also sent on the Meeting Chat for their peers to follow. Students from other groups can support the presentation groups in answering the questions, and they can get a bonus point for their support.

In contrast, the groups that did not prepare the questions got a minus point. The rewarding mechanism was expected to motivate students to read the learning materials and prepare questions and answers. This helped reinforce students' knowledge and made their online presentations highly interactive.

The second instrument is a teacher and peer feedback. When questions were posted on Meeting Chat, the teacher evaluated the content and asked questions so that students could make appropriate adjustments to the content of the presentation. The teacher gave comments and suggestions on each answer, and she also provided the correct answers and gave students more resources to study further.

The qualitative data analysis focuses on what can be celebrated and what needs attention. By looking at both teacher and learners' reflections and feedback, it is possible to determine the priority areas for action.

Findings and discussion

This section discusses the students' performance in their presentations and teacher's scaffolding, as well as the results of the students' interviews.

Students' performance and teacher's scaffolding

During the course, students participated in presentations in 5 sessions in weeks 2, 3, 5, 8, and

9. In the first two weeks, students' presentations lacked consistency and generalization, and they contained many overlapping details.

To support students in overcoming their weaknesses, teacher and peer feedback was used to help learners reflect on their performance. It was found useful to provide sentence patterns suggested by Croswell (2021) for giving feedback. For example:

“Something I really appreciate about your presentation is...”

“I think you did a great job when you ...”

“I would love to see you do more of X as it relates to Y...”

According to Croswell (2021), “these sentence patterns help students avoid thinking of feedback in terms of “positive” or “negative”. Rather, students were encouraged to think of feedback in terms of reinforcing and redirecting. Reinforcing feedback is given when we want someone to keep doing a certain positive behavior. With directing feedback, we are telling someone that we want them to stop doing X and start doing Y.” With these types of feedback, students were enabled to explore the artistic values of a particular literary work. For example, group 5, in presenting Shakespeare's King Lear, demonstrated the ability to analyze the use of metaphors to convey the theme of nothingness. Thanks to teacher and peer feedback, learners were able to see the meaning in small details, which are symbolic of the concept of nothingness. Student 3 reflected on King Lear's status: "At first, I didn't pay attention to the fact that King Lear lost everything after his decision to divide his kingdom. The feedback from my teacher and classmates enables me to see things in terms of the metaphors used in the play.” These types of feedback can serve as examples of quality peer scaffolding advocated by Shin et al. (2020). By the word “quality”, Shin et al. place emphasis on the type of peer scaffolding that enables learners to ask critical questions or poses new ideas while engaging in group activities.

Teacher feedback was followed by guiding questions for class discussion. For example, the following questions were raised to help learners wrap up their presentations:

- (1) What are the most distinctive features of English literature during the 1066 period?
- (2) How did social factors influence the literary development of this period?
- (3) Who are the most influential authors and why?

These questions helped students focus on developing generalization skills and critical thinking skills. They were able to identify the general features of a particular period and the roles played by the authors of that period.

Comprehension scaffolding was also used to help students understand the events or plot of the literary text. Student 7 said: “I was reminded of the subplot in which nothing causes the same trouble to the minor characters. The feedback encourages me to further explore the theme of the play that is conveyed in the subplot.” Student 10 said: “Thanks to the feedback, I started to notice the consequences that King Lear caused and suffered from his act of sheer folly. He lost his kingdom, then his status, then his family, and his mind.” It is noticeable that this type of

scaffolding involved linguistic, cultural, and reading skill assistance from the teacher or peers when needed. The findings of this present study are consistent with those of Zarei and Alipour's (2019) study and Rawengwan and Yawiloeng's (2020) study in that scaffolding provided a kind of comprehension aid to help learners gain a better understanding of the reading text and to motivate them in developing reading strategies.

Similarly, Yusuk (2018) reported that scaffolding techniques could enhance Thai EFL students' reading comprehension by supporting them to draw on prior knowledge and create new information. Wood (2017) also emphasized the importance of teacher assistance and guidance in language analysis prior to engaging students in creative activities. He noted that they were willing to engage in more challenging responses only once they felt confident with their understanding of the literary text.

Questioning also helps students in summarizing. For example, the following two questions were used to help Group 2 recognize the overlapping in their summary. The first question is, "How do the works of author X reflect the social life of Britain in...?". The second question is, "What are the social factors reflected in the works of author X in ...?" These two questions have the same meaning. Students can use either one, but they should not use both. Otherwise, their presentation becomes lengthy because of unnecessary repetition. These two questions gave students an example of how to avoid overlapping details. When students were asked to look at the presentation again, they were able to identify the overlapping details. Student 8 said: "I think it's useful to look again at our presentation to see if there are any overlapping. And the use of questioning helps us maintain focus in our presentation." Students in Group 2 reported that their group perceived questioning as an effective tool to help them identify and summarize the main points of their presentation contents.

Interview results

The results of the interview showed that students preferred teacher feedback on their group work preparation because they could know what to improve and therefore felt more confident in presenting their group work. They also appreciated their peer feedback because they had an opportunity to share their views in an online learning environment. Student 1 said: "We were provided with sentence patterns to give feedback which helps us to avoid negative criticism." Student 4 said: "I didn't feel embarrassed at the feedback because my classmates used sentence patterns to give constructive comments on my performance." The interview findings of this present study are in line with those of Aliyu and Yakubu's (2019) study, which reveals that "learners acquire knowledge from interactions with peers and experts who are more knowledgeable" (p. 87). More importantly, it was found that peer feedback or peer scaffolding was mutually beneficial to both the scaffolders and the scaffolders. This fact is evidenced in Demissie's (2018) study in which scaffolding intervention was used to enhance learners' reading performance. Both the weaker learners and the more knowledgeable learners agreed that the scaffolding intervention as socially valid.

Students also liked questioning activities during the presentation. They found it highly

interactive, and they suggested that more questioning patterns should be introduced to help them develop interpretation skills. Student 2 said: “I find the questioning session engaging. Actually, I learned a lot from my friends when I asked questions. The problem is I need more questioning patterns to formulate my questions.” Student 6 admitted she was not good at questioning: “I simply don't know how to ask questions of good quality.”

Students wanted other forms of support besides questioning activities to build their interpretation skills and creativity. As far as this matter is concerned, Manzolillo (2016) proposed the following activities: telling the story of a minor character, rewriting a passage from a different point of view, and filling in a blank in the narration. In Manzolillo's ideas, these forms of scaffolding help learners develop the fundamental skills of reading, interpreting, and criticizing literary texts. Ha Thi Thu Nguyen (2016) suggested other creative expression activities such as writing a poem based on word prompts, writing a letter to a fictional character or a continuation to a story, and enacting role-plays using scripts adapted from literary texts, structured guidelines, and their own improvisations. The researcher maintained that scaffolding activities like these put learners in creative experiences of literature and heighten their connection with it. In the context of this present study, those suggested activities can be implemented in the next phase of action research.

Another type of scaffolding used in this study is providing relevant resources. Most students stated that they found the digital resources the lecturer and their peers shared with them usefully. In presenting Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Group 8 could gain access to suggested links and websites to learn about this novel. By watching movies with different versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, students could make the comparison in terms of perspectives and characterization. The students in Group 8 all agreed that they were motivated to learn English literature while watching different movie versions of a literary text. According to Travis and DeSpain (2018), using digital resources “can enrich student experiences of reading, writing, and researching” (p. ix). Likewise, Roig-Marín and Prieto (2021) points out that the multimodal nature of digital resources may increase students' motivation when dealing with literary texts. In this aspect, Yawiloeng's (2020) suggestion for considering appropriate multimedia modes for EFL classrooms also applies to English literature classrooms in the particular setting in Vietnam. It is, therefore, necessary to focus on enhancing literary appreciation through the use of multimodal texts along with teacher and peer scaffolding within a multimodal learning environment.

Conclusion

Overall, scaffolding provided by the teacher is important in helping learners understand literary texts. Teacher feedback plays a supportive role, supplementing peer feedback to help learners realize the limitations of the content they present. Questioning is also a useful technique in helping students explore different aspects of literary works. Providing resources helps students focus on pertinent facts about the presentation tasks, and it also has an effective impact on

learners in their search for relevant information. All these activities aimed to enable the students to interact creatively with the texts and the class before and during their oral presentations in the English literature classroom.

The above-mentioned findings imply that the teacher's role is to provide learners with appropriate scaffolding to encourage them to explore ideas and values in a literary text through social interaction instead of imposing subjective judgments. It is also suggested that peer scaffolding should be endorsed in the English literature classroom to facilitate learners' oral presentations.

This paper only focuses on the students taught by the researcher within a semester. Further studies should be conducted during a longer period of time to see how scaffolding affects students' performance in the long run. Other forms of scaffolding should also be explored in connection with students' performance in online literature classes.

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