SCAFFOLDING IN EFL COLLEGE CLASSES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: The current study adopted sociocultural discourse analysis framework to analyze scaffolding in verbal interaction in EFL university classes. The students were learning English from a prescribed textbook. Recorded talks of these students and their teachers in their natural classroom settings were sequenced to explore the role of scaffolding. The findings reveal the process of how students co-constructed knowledge in learning new concepts as well as English vocabulary. The results also indicate the role of mediation through the use of language. From the findings, implications were put forward regarding grouping students and training both teachers and students the strategies to use scaffolding.
Keywords: Group interaction, EFL university students, sociocultural discourse analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Driven mainly by sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky and his colleagues, this study was carried out to explore scaffolding and verbal mediation in EFL university classes in Vietnam. The study aimed to scrutinize the use of languages of both English and Vietnamese to interact among teachers and students to complete the tasks given. Sociocultural theory was adopted as the framework for the analysis of the recorded speech.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky focused on the concept of language learning in social interaction and "lays emphasis on the role which is played by social, cultural and historical artifacts in the child's mental development" (Pathan, Memon, Memon, Khoso & Bux, 2018 p. 232.) The theory has been interpreted to describe the way second language learners acquire language when they collaborate and interact with other people. The extended framework suggests "collaboration and interaction as main ingredients of the theory" (Pathan, Memon, Memon, Khoso & Bux, 2018 p. 233). In fact, "SCT is regarded as a theory of human cognitive development and higher mental functions …and higher mental functions initiate from social communications; and while people participate in social activities, they are involved in mental and communicative functions" (Mirzaee & Maftoon, 2016; p. 3).

2.2. Scaffolding in sociocultural theory

Interaction is the key concept in sociocultural theory and it is realized via the process of scaffolding and mediation. According to Panhwar, Ansari and Ansari(2016), scaffolding is elaborated from the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Vygotsky. The ZPD is a type of assistance from adults, which enables a student or an inexperienced person to solve problems, perform activities or accomplish targets which he/she could not achieve without help. The ZPD indicates the significance of the active and participatory relationship between a learner and a supportive instructor in any form as people, teacher, social norms and values, ritual, customs (Kaur, 2017).

According to this socio-cultural perspective, "learning a new language implies that the mastery of that specific language is jointly constructed from students' dialectic collaboration for meaning to be mediated" (Kung, 2017, p. 3). The socio-cultural perspective in classrooms views education as a dialogic process in which students and teachers work within settings that reflect the values and social practices of schools through interaction (Rasidir, 2017). Learning is embedded and inherent within social events that occur when an individual interacts with people, objects and events in his or her culture and environment (Kaur, 2017). According to this author, "Through peer interactions and shared activities, learners are able to construct knowledge, form specific mental structures and experience higher mental processes as these interactions stimulate learners' ZPD" (p. 66).

2.3. Previous studies

Quite a few studies have been carried out, exploring scaffolding in the framework of sociocultural theory. For example, the study by Rasidir (2017) focused on primary school students' talk while they worked on collaborative activities during English reading comprehension lessons confirmed that students engaged in various talk types, negotiation strategies and quality talk features. The results showed that negotiation for meaning was more frequently used than other negotiation strategies. Besides, the qualitative analysis indicated that as students worked together, they did not work through their disputes. Thus, although the students were able to engage in various talk features during the discussion, the interaction was neither rich nor conclusive.

The study by Rudsberg, Östman and Östman (2017) investigated how encounters with peers affect an individual's meaning making in argumentation about socio-scientific issues, and how the individual's meaning making influences the argumentation at the collective level. The analysis is conducted using the analytical method "transactional argumentation analysis". The results show that the students are scaffolded by peers when construing arguments, and thereby acts on others' reasoning when making meaning. Furthermore, the results show that most of the additions made by the analysed students are taken further by peers in the subsequent discussion. This study concluded that an individual's earlier experiences, knowledge and thinking contribute to scaffolding in the form of the collective meaning making in the classroom.

The study by Mukai (2017) explored the processes of the creation and utilization of

educational peer interaction which are afforded and constrained by contextual factors. The researchers collected from the insider perspectives of lecturers, local students, native-speaker and non-native-speaker international students, from three disciplines, namely, applied linguistics, engineering, and business through semi-structured interviews, triangulated with non-participant observations audio-recorded interaction among students. The findings show that different types of peer interaction are situationally created by lecturers as well as students under the influences of multiple contextual factors, including learning objectives, pedagogical belief, and physical classroom settings. Besides, the students were found to utilize scaffolding opportunities to collaboratively develop their learning of the target academic knowledge while actively and interactively deploying a wide range of communicative functions, such as utterance completion, repetition, summary, validation, and information addition/edition.

Chen (2020) examined disagreement in peer communication and its effect on learners' task performance. It compared the peer interaction of learners carrying out two collaborative writing tasks, focusing on their resolution of disagreements and the co-constructed texts. The findings indicated that a collaborative pattern of peer dialogue that encouraged deliberation after disagreement was more likely to result in successful resolution and more precise co-constructed texts. However, interlocutors employing a non-collaborative pattern of interaction failed to fully engage with each other's contributions. The author concluded that disagreement itself can prolong peer interaction due to learners' evaluations, reasoning, and explanations, affording more opportunities for practice in the target language and improving their comprehension.

The study by Nguyễn Thu Hiền (2017) explored learners' engagement with language during peer talk. The findings of this study provide a detailed picture of how a group of EFL Vietnamese learners engaged with English language during oral classroom peer interaction. The findings show the learners' engagement with the target language was firstly demonstrated through the structure of their discussion. In addition, the learners engaged with the process of making meanings, thus construing their classroom learning experiences and enacting their roles and attitudes. Besides, both generic structure of their talk and the experiential meanings describe the learners' cognitive engagement with language. On the other hand, the interpersonal meanings depict both learners' social and affective engagement with language, that is, how learners initiated talk, negotiated to maintain the talk, and provided scaffolding as well as enacted attitudes towards other interlocutors and the talk.

Despite the fact that numerous studies have been carried out to examine interaction in the framework of sociocultural theory, little is known how scaffolding actually takes place in English classes for EFL university students and how students learn from the process. The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does scaffolding take place in EFL university classes?

2. How do English and Vietnamese (if present) mediate EFL university students' learning process?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was extracted from a larger project. Due to the scope of this paper, only data from the audio recording was reported. Audio recording was used for data collection, given the fact that the primary purpose of the study is to understand how scaffolding takes place in English classes for EFL university students and how the teachers as well as students interact in their lesson.

The research site of the current study is a college which trains students from different parts of Vietnam but mainly from the south. The students are expected to meet the outcome of English proficiency of 600 points in the TOEIC or 5.5 in the IELTS for graduation from the college. The participants were the second-year EFL students at this college. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years old and the students were learning English as a compulsory subject. The teachers and students were asked for permission to be recorded while they were studying in their natural classrooms. One of the researchers was a non-participant and sat quietly in a corner during the recordings. Mobile phones were used to record during the lessons. No identities of the teachers and students were revealed in the transcript which uses "Teacher" and Student 1, Student 2 and so on.

Sociocultural discourse analysis was adopted for the current study. Mercer (2007) argued that classroom discourse can be analyzed based on the Vygotskian conception of language as both a cultural and a psychological tool. For qualitative features of interactions, students use language as a tool for collective thinking to create more shared understanding and to inter-think. This collective thinking looks at the general social climate of ideas associated with a topic rather than specific conversations. It focuses more on the function of scaffolding for the pursuit of joint intellectual activity. "It incorporates a concern with the lexical content and the cohesive structure of talk, especially across the contributions of individual speakers, because word choices and cohesive patterning can represent ways that knowledge is being jointly constructed" (Mercer, 2007, p. 141). In general, sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer, 2007) examines the relationship between particular interactions which occur at different times in the classroom, revealing the patterns and the purposes of interaction.

4. FINDINGS

Excerpts presented below were extracted from full recordings of classroom interactions based on their emerged features which show patterns of talk between teachers and students or among students. These excerpts embrace the operational definition of classroom interactions presented early in chapter two. Besides, it is formal representation of the linguistic context as well as of a domain-specific ontology showing conceptual relations and establishing discourse coherence (Cimiano, Reyle & Šarić, 2005). Where Vietnamese is used, translation is provided in square brackets.

Excerpt 1

The students in the following excerpt were doing a task provided in the textbook. They were discussing the qualities of a good manager. The teacher was monitoring the discussion.

Teacher: Now, which one do you think is the most important? You, please!

Student 1: Uhm, I think it …..ability.

Teacher: Why?

Student 1: I think when you believe someone, you give chance …..for someone who can develop himself/herself.

Teacher: Ok, now the other. You, please!

Student 2: I think listening to other suggestions of staff is the best because when you listen to others, you can find the best choice to solve the problems.

Teacher: Ok, good. Another idea? You, please!

Student 3: I think, I'm going to…….

Teacher: Ok. Good, good. Another idea? You, please! Student 4: Uhm…

Teacher: Which one do you choose?

Student 4: I think communicating with colleague clearly… Teacher: Why?

Student 4: When you have good communication, you can share ideas to someone

Teacher: You share your ideas to others, and then they will understand what you mean, and then they will follow well. Ok. Now, the other. You, please!

Student 5: I think listen to other suggestions is the best because it makes that easy to comment in our work.

Teacher: Ok. How about you?

As the teacher called students individually, the interaction went in the direction of teacher-students. The teacher lines prompted students to produce more English and to contribute to the discussion. They also provided hints so that students were able to figure out what to contribute to the discussion. The lines of students 4 and 5 in excerpt 01 above indicate their understanding and being engaged into classroom interaction. The teacher called each student to talk and put questions for students to answer, and managed both the topic of conversation and turn-taking to ensure that the class was following and that everyone understood and had a turn in the flow of the discourse. Feedback of the teacher in this excerpt included praises, comments and elaborating question words such as "why" to facilitate students' talk, which serve to scaffold the students. These features, according to sociocultural theory, indicate mediation, or how teacher talk facilitates the thinking process of learners (Lantolf, 2000). As all the questions put by the teacher were in English, they prompted the answers in English by students.

Excerpt 02

The students were discussing some statements from the textbook.

Teacher: Discuss these statements everybody. The first statement, "making a list of things to do is a waste of time". Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Students: Disagree

Students: Agree

Teacher: Agree? It's OK to disagree. But tell me the reasons?

Student 1: I don't agree with this idea because I think when we plan to making list of things, we will work more effectively and we don't have to ….the work, and we can work step by step as much as we have made the list of things.

Teacher: Yes, thanks.

Student 2: I don't think so because making list of things to do makes working fluency.

Teacher: No, not fluency, effectively. Fluency là lưu loát [Explain the meaning of "fluency" in Vietnamese].

Student 2: Ý em muốn nói là nó trôi chảy. [I meant things will go smoothly] **Teacher:** Smooth.

Student 2: and, uhm, that's all.

Teacher: Thanks! How about you?

Student 3: Uhm, a list of things you help you do all the work you planned before more smoothly and you can avoid all the miserable things of the unlucky situations, and you won't be…..Uhm, in conclusion, you will feel very happy when you have a list of things to do before . Because all of the things you will prepare your mind….

Teacher: Yes, thank you. How about you? Student 4: ….

Teacher: Who else? Yeah, Tu?

Student 5: Because I think, in my opinion, if you know the time and you need the time, you have to make plans.

Teacher: Again please. I can't get what you mean.

Student 5: If you know the time…Muốn biết thời gian hãy xem đồng hồ, muốn có thời gian hãy lập kế hoạch. [Student 5 translated the statement "If you want to know the time, look at your watch. If you want to have time, make plans" into Vietnamese].

Teacher: You mean that is a very famous proverb, right?! Student 5: Proverb?

Teacher: Yes, proverb. If you want to know the time, you can look at your watch, if you want to have the time, you have to make a plan.

Student 5: Yes.

Teacher: Maybe in the future, her saying will be listed on the calendar … **Students:** *laughing*

[The teacher then directed the class to discuss another statement.]

The teacher put a question, students answered and the teacher gave evaluation of the response and elicited answers, for example, "*But tell me the reasons*?". The students took turns to contribute to the discussion. Student 2 mistook the word "fluency" with "smoothly" but thanks to the teacher's explanation, he/she could understand the use of the word. This bears a feature of scaffolding in sociocultural theory as thanks to the hint of the teacher, S2 understood the word meaning. With more interaction, students were able to give their opinions on the topic under discussion. Besides, the excerpt indicates the collective interaction between the teacher and students and among the students. The teacher was less dominant in this transcript, still she used questions to keep students on track and scaffolded their learning. This excerpt however does not show features of joint construction of knowledge between the teacher and students or the mediating role of teacher talk.

Excerpt 03

This excerpt illustrates how the teacher used both English and Vietnamese to mediate students to understand the concept of "joining a department" in a business.

Teacher: Các bạn xem cô Stephany cô nói nè [Listen to Ms. Stephany], "I'm joining", rồi sau cái từ joining là gì ạ [What is the phrases used after "joining"?]

Marketing department - là cái bộ phận hay là nghề nghiệp? [Is this a department or a job?]

Là một cái vị trí công việc hay là 1 cái bộ phận nào? [A job or a department?]

Students: A position.
Teacher: Nói mãi mà chúng ta vẫn chưa nhớ là sau "joining" thì phải dùng cái gì ạ? [I have reminded you for many times but you don't remember what words should be used after joining]
Students: Human resources.
Teacher: Human resources là cái gì? [What is it?] Students: Bộ phận. [A department]
Teacher: Bộ phận [A department]. Good. Như vậy muốn dùng joining thì phải nói là gì ạ? [So,if you want to use "joining", how should you say?]
Students: Human resources department

The teacher was trying to elicit the correct answers for "joining a department" or "human resource department" from students. The interaction went on for several responses until the students could make the correct answer from their understanding. The guiding questions and prompts from the teacher have features of scaffolding to provoke thought and lead learners to new understanding (Lee, 1987; Moll, 1990; Azmitia, Diaz & Berk, 1992).

In this excerpt, students answered in chorus. It could happen for the reason that the class was crowded and the collective response was a norm or the interaction could be influenced by cultural characteristic of a Vietnamese collective culture. Besides, the teachers asked the question openly to all the students. The teacher's speech mediated students and assisted them to correctly understand a business concept and a language expression.

Excerpt 04
The students were discussing the skills needed to improve a company. They had a CD to listen and to check whether their answers were mentioned in the CD.
Teacher: If you together make the company grow, make the company improve, so what skills do you need?
Student 1: Enthusiasm.
Teacher: Enthusiasm. Uhm, more clearly? What is the skill to be enthusiastic?
Student 2: I think another skill is teamwork.
Teacher: Team working skill. OK. Let's listen to the next part and check   *Playing the tape*.
Teacher: Teamwork. That's right! Team-working skill. It will encourage the consultants to work as a team. OK, so any more questions that you have about…? So it's very related to what you have studied about management. I hope it will be related to managing that subject you study. So let's now go on with unit 11. This unit is about conflict. It is a situation you have. A situation where two people are not happy with each other. For example, in this game, it is a game but what is happening between them, one person is trying to win so let's think about their wish, their objective? Do they have the same objective? Do they have the same wish?
Students: Yes.
Teacher: Yes, but what is the difference in their objective? In other words, what is the conflict they are having?
Students: *discussing*

In the excerpt above, the teacher took a very long turn to explain to students a quality that people need to develop a company/business. Despite the fact that the teacher dominated the talk, she was able to help students understand the task required. It can be inferred from the transcript that the audio recording was also an important artifact mediating the process of students' learning about the concept of teamwork skill. It is not very clear whether the audio transcript from the CD which helped students to understand what is needed to improve a company or the interaction between the teacher and students. However, the transcript shows that the teacher tried to check students' listening comprehension as well as concept understanding.

> **Excerpt 05**
> **Teacher**: Now, any volunteers?
> **Student 1**: Em đọc 1 câu, bạn đọc 1 câu được không cô? [Can I read one sentence and my friend reads the other?]
> **Teacher**: uhm.
> **Student 1**: Let's look back the moment at how the dollar has performed against the Euro over the last 6 months.
> **Teacher**: Very good. The first one is over the last 6 months. "Over" means you use before the time but the period of time. Next!
> **Student 2**: It stayed steady for the first month of the year at around 1 point, uhm, of 0.93 Euro to 1 dollar in February however, its value fell by 2 points from 0.93 to 0.91 Euro.
> **Teacher**: Very good. Now we have "fell by". Và vì nó giảm cho nên nó có cái movement [As it fell, there was a movement]. Các bạn thấy ở đây movement là nó từ 0.93 ha, nó có sự chuyển đổi từ $0.93 lên tới 1 Euro. [You see, the movement here is from 0.93 because there was a change from $0.93 to 1 Euro].
> **Student 1**: In the second half of February, the dollar rose to almost 96 Euro … remained stable for the first half of March.
> **Teacher**: OK. Bạn nói là "In the first" đúng không? Hay là "during"? [Did you say " In the first" or "during"?]
> **Student 1**: In
> **Teacher**: À, ngoài ra chữ "In" chúng ta còn sử dụng được chữ "during" nữa. Tại vì "the second half" là nó cũng vừa có thể tính là 1 điểm thời gian ha các bạn [Beside the word "in" we use "during" because "the second half" can be a point of time].

In excerpt 05, students were learning the concept of movement in prices, they also had an opportunity to review synonyms, for example, go up and rise, fall and decrease, etc. They reviewed the prepositions in phrases to use with time expressions. It can be seen that such classroom interactions provide students with language input and opportunity to produce output related to the content of the lesson. It cannot be denied that the explanations from the teacher consolidated English vocabulary and phrases among the students. The interaction in this excerpt does not show the mediating role of language (s) or how the teacher provoked thought in learners. However, it reveals that the classroom interaction with the questions and feedback from the teacher, in this case, "very good" and further explanations by the teacher scaffolded students' understanding of prespositions and phrasal verbs. The teacher's talk in this excerpt was very much to help students learn some prepositions and phrases such as "over", "fell by", "in" and "during".

5. DISCUSSION

The excerpts overall reveal that the results of the current study reiterate the finding by Rasidir (2017) and that by Rudsberg, Östman and Östman (2017) which disclose that negotiation for meaning was more frequently used than other negotiation strategies in classroom interaction. The students in this study relied on teachers' instruction, scaffolding and their peers' linguistic knowledge and support to figure out the meaning related to their majors. The students were able to engage in various talk features during the discussions and the individual's meaning making influences the co-construction of knowledge at the collective level.

The results of the current study however were different from those by Chen (2020) which showed that interlocutors employed a non-collaborative pattern of interaction and disagreement in interaction of peers which prolonged peer but afforded more opportunities for practice in the target language and improving their comprehension. The students in the current study were interacting in different situations and tasks given but they tended to collaborate and used language to mediate one another.

The study echoed the findings by Nguyễn Thu Hiền (2017) which focused how a group of EFL Vietnamese learners engaged with English language during oral classroom peer interaction and showed that the learners' engagement with the target language was firstly demonstrated through the structure of their discussion. In addition, the learners engaged with the process of making meanings, thus construing their classroom learning experiences and enacting their roles and attitudes. However, this study did not reveal the role of the mother tongue which was used by the students in the current study. The mother tongue actually supported and mediated the students in the current study to think about and figure out the notions and concepts related to their fields of study. In other words, the results of the current study indicate the role of mediation in both languages, the target language and the mother tongue, in this case, Vietnamese.

In the current study, the transcript of recorded classoom interaction revealed the dominant role of the teachers in the way that they talked most of the time in the classroom. However, it should be noticed that they were guiding and scaffolding the students through the techniques of questioning, eliticing, praising, and prompting. It remains a controversial issue of how frequent classroom teachers should talk to scaffold students.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study was set out to examine how scaffolding and mediation actually take place in English classes for EFL university students. Data was collected from recorded actual classroom interaction and analyzed basing on the principles of sociocultural discourse analysis. Due to the scope of the paper, only typical excerpts were presented to illustrate incidents of scaffolding and mediation. The findings reveal that during the processes, the teachers' questions and hints scaffolded students' understanding and language use. Besides, the students co-constructed knowledge through learning concepts as well as English vocabulary. Interaction between teachers

and students and among students served as mediation to promote understanding and stimulating thinking of students. In that mediation process, both languages: the target language and the mother tongue were used.

From the findings of the current study, it is suggested that in classes for EFL university students, teachers should be trained to scaffold students. With knowledge and practice of scaffolding techniques, such as questioning, giving hints, praising, eliciting, teachers will be able to engage students into the process of learning and support them to be capable of understanding language expression use and come up with ideas to contribute to classroom discussions. Additionally, it is important to group students of different levels of language proficiency and major knowledge and train them the strategies to use verbal language to mediate each other in classroom interaction as through this process, it benefits students in terms of understanding new concepts, language phrases and vocabulary. Besides, teachers as well as students who provide support and scaffolding to other students will sharpen their instructing skills as well as produce more language output, which in the long term develop their language fluency.

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