Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding has its origins in the work of the psychologist Vygotsky as well as in studies of early language learning. Bruner (1978) believed that for learning to take place, appropriate social interactional frameworks must be provided. In the case of the young child learning language, the instructional component consists of the caregiver (normally the mother) providing a framework to allow the child to learn. To do this, the caregiver should always be one step ahead of the child (Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development*), and by using contexts that are extremely familiar and routinized the caregiver can facilitate the child's learning. These highly predictable routines, such as reading books together or conversations at bath time or meals, offer the caregiver and child a structure within which the caregiver can continually raise her expectations of the child's performance. For Bruner, this meant specifically the child's *linguistic* performance, because, he argued, it is within these formats that children learn how to use language.

Cazden (1983) adopted Bruner's use of the term scaffolding, but distinguished between *vertical* and *sequential scaffolding*. Vertical scaffolding involves the adult extending the child's language by asking further questions. So in response to the child's utterance 'cow', she might say 'Yes, that's a cow. What does the cow say?', or she might ask for an elaboration 'And what did we see when we went to the farm today?' Whereas *sequential scaffolding* is the scaffolding found in the games played with children at meals, bath times, and so on.

Applebee and Langer (1983) used the notion of *instructional scaffolding* as a way to describe essential aspects of formal instruction. In their view, learning is a process of gradual internalization of routines and procedures available to the learner from the social and cultural context in which the learning takes place. In instructional scaffolding the language learner is assisted in a new task by a more skilled language user who models the language task to be used verbally and/or in writing. As well as through modelling, scaffolding is provided by leading or probing questions to extend or elaborate the knowledge the learner already possesses. Rather than evaluating the learner's answers, the teacher is supporting, encouraging, and providing additional props. As the learner's competence grows, so the scaffolding is gradually reduced until the learner is able to function autonomously in that task and generalize to similar circumstances.

There are five criteria for effective scaffolding (Applebee 1986):
1. *Student ownership of the learning event.* The instructional task must allow students to make their own contribution to the activity as it evolves.

2. *Appropriateness of the instructional task.* This means that the tasks should build upon the knowledge and skills the student already possesses, but should be difficult enough to allow new learning to occur.
3. *A structured learning environment.* This will provide a natural sequence of thought and language, thus presenting the student with useful strategies and approaches to the task.
4. *Shared responsibility.* Tasks are solved jointly in the course of instructional interaction, so the role of the teacher is more collaborative than evaluative.
5. *Transfer of control.* As students internalize new procedures and routines, they should take a greater responsibility for controlling the progress of the task such that the amount of interaction may actually increase as the student becomes more competent.

For Applebee, one of the most appealing features of these principles is that they provide a new way to think about familiar teaching routines, rather than a wholesale abandonment of the past.

Other views on scaffolding, such as Long and Sato (1984) see conversational scaffolding, in particular, as the crucible of language acquisition. Hatch (1978) has also argued that language learning evolves out of learning how to carry out conversation and that syntactic constructions develop out of conversation. Rather than assuming that the learner first learns a form and then uses that form in discourse, Hatch assumes that the learner first learns *how* to do conversation, how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic forms develop. Specifically in building a conversation with a partner (vertical construction), the learner establishes the prototypes for later syntactic development (horizontal construction). However, Sato (1986) makes the point that even if the collaborative discourse of scaffolding is credited with making a positive contribution to syntactic structures, what is difficult to determine is the role played in the acquisition of morphological features (such as the regular past tense). It is possible that collaborative discourse plays a significant part in early acquisition, but it is doubtful whether all interlanguage rules can emerge in this way.

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Further reading
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