

The Use of Scaffolding to Enhance Interactional Competence in the EFL Speaking Classroom

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Abstract

This article reports the improvement of students' interactional competence with the use of scaffolding intervention and Walsh (2012) Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) to strengthen interactional competence of Thai students in the EFL speaking classroom. Thirty eight of third year English major students at Chandrasakorn Rajabhat University were asked to participate in group discussion of 5 to 6 people. The research instruments of this study were consent form, the holistic scale of oral competence, the CIC template, teacher journal, and video recording of students' group discussion. Before collecting the data, all participants were asked to sign the consent form as the evidence that they were willing to participate in this research. The prior speaking test was also given to all participants to identify their speaking ability. The assessment could help the researcher create suitable groups, where a mixed-level of participants' speaking ability combined so the more capable ones can assist the weaker ones to achieve the communicative goals. The prior assessment was established by the researcher before the actual research started. Each participant was asked to interact with the researcher for five minutes in one topic and the audio of discussions were recorded. The holistic scale of oral competence was used to analyze the participants' speaking ability. After, the researcher and the expert reviewed the findings together and sorted participants into three levels (high, medium, or low speaking competency) based on their speaking performance. To analyze the main findings, the classroom interactional competence (CIC) template was used as the main instrument. Both researcher and the inter-rater used the CIC template to analyze the development of participants' interactional competence in this study. The teacher journal, and video recording of students' group discussion were also used to expand the findings in this research. All research instruments and the scaffolding framework were validated by the three experts before collecting the data. The study revealed that scaffolding stimulated the participants to work in groups and help each other to achieve the outcome. Moreover, it offered rooms for participants to discuss and share ideas intrinsically and more productively.

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Introduction

It is always a challenge for second or foreign language learners to speak English effectively. In the same way, as a means to improve students' speaking skills, there were a shift of changes of teaching methods and teaching focuses. In the early stage, the teaching focused largely on communicative competence (CC). Hymes (1972, p.282) claimed that CC comprised "both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use". He believed that a child needed to know both grammatical rules and appropriateness to form a sentence. Further, a child acquires competence when he/she knows where/when not to speak, what is appropriate to talk about and to whom, where to talk, and what manner they should have. Similarly, Canale and Swain (1980) pointed out that competence derived from the 4 key components, namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, and strategic competence. However, there were criticisms against Hymes, Canale, and Swain due to the impracticality of real communication. By then, the new term interactional competence (IC) was coined with the claim that it could offer more practical views on actual communication and collaboration between the speaker and interlocutors. In 1986, Kramsch was the first to argue that "communication is co-constructed by participants in communication" (Galaczi 2013, p. 1) and for that "it allows us to concentrate more on the ability of learners to communicate intended meaning and to establish joint understanding" (Walsh 2012, pp. 2-3). To this point, it is guided that all participants gather together to interact to create meaning as Tecedor (2016, p.24) stated that IC "poses a view of interaction that is social rather than cognitive". Young added to Kramsch's argument further that IC allows participants to co-construct knowledge and that "knowledge and skills are local" (2013, p.20). The term 'local' refers to the specific practices that participants share in common in conducting knowledge and to him interactions between participants occur in a more informal way. Likewise, Riley (1996) argued that it took two to tango. He claimed that, CC was "neither dyadic nor intersubjective" (p.119). He pointed out that such concept relied heavily on the individual rather the interaction in pair. Moreover, he described that CC lacked interpretative dimension (p.120). Finally, he pointed out that by the means to produce appropriate utterances "participants are deprived of all real autonomy" (p.123). He explained that as humans, we are not always willing to follow the pre-subpositions or the implications of discourses produced by the speaking partner. On the contrary, we may argue, challenge, or persuade to change their minds (p. 124).

To practice IC in classrooms, Walsh (2012) proposed the conceptualization of classroom interactional competence (CIC) and suggested strategies called 'space'. Firstly, teachers should provide some time for learners to think and process information. Therefore, teachers should extend wait time (pausing) a little longer to allow students to take turns.

Secondly, the teacher should not correct students' mistakes all the time unless they are necessary. Thirdly, the teacher should give explicit signposting in instructions to learners. It should be clear whether the teacher demands the whole class, the group, or the individual to correspond with. Fourthly, the teacher should not interrupt students in the middle of conversation. Students should have a chance to fully elaborate their opinions especially for a complicated topic. Lastly but importantly, the teacher should make sure that students' contributions are accurate and logical. To do so, the teacher may ask students to clarify their points and this strategy is called seeking clarification. Through this point, although CIC is seen as a conceptualization where teachers and students acquire more opportunities to maximize their teaching and learning abilities and where both collaborate to produce mutual agreement of discussion, its framework is rather imprecise. Responding to this fact, the researcher decided to integrate scaffolding teaching method with Walsh's CIC framework to strengthen students' IC. In this research, the researcher integrated Walsh CIC (2012) with the scaffolding teaching method with the aims to develop the participants' IC and to stimulate participants to produce more productive and meaningful utterances.

Objective

To investigate how scaffolding teaching method assists students to improve interactional competence in the EFL speaking classroom.

Research Methodology

Participants

The target population of the study were 72 third year English major students who enrolled in ENGL3203 course in both sections 101 and 102. However, only 38 students who enrolled in section 102 volunteered to participate in this study and allowed the researcher to record videos of their group discussions throughout the course. Hence, the data were collected from the volunteered group.

All participants were asked to take a speaking test in order to measure their English communicative level. After, they were sorted into groups (with mixed English communicative competency) of 5-6 people for group discussion. For each discussion, each group has 10-15 minutes to discuss the given topic and questions. The topic has been given to students in advance so they can do some research and find more information to be used in the discussion. However, students were required to discuss questions related to the given topic and they were required to answer these questions spontaneously without having much time for preparation.

Participants were asked to scaffold and participate in 8 group discussions. However, only 4 group discussions were chosen to be used as data analysis due to the time limitation of research study.

To investigate the participants' IC, three research instruments were used: the CIC Template, video recordings of participants' group discussion, and teacher journal.

Research Instruments

Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) Template

In the CIC template, the researcher adopted the four interactional resources suggested by Walsh (2012) as criterions. The four resources comprise of 1) turn taking, 2) repair, 3) overlaps and interruptions, and 4) topic management. For turn taking, the researcher aims to assess ability of participants in taking, holding, and passing turns. For repair, the focuses are restricted to self-correction and peer correction. For overlaps and interruptions, the researcher intends to investigate the connection that participants use to reflect their understanding toward the current discussion. Lastly yet importantly, for topic management, the researcher aims to investigate how well students perform in engaging the topic, supporting points, and how they deal with breakdowns. To differentiate participants' interactional competence, the researcher divided CIC template into four levels based on the participants' ability to interact in group discussion.

The CIC template has been piloted and assessed by the three experts before being used to evaluate the participants' IC in this study. Further, to increase the reliability of the research results, all conversations in group discussions were being transcribed and evaluated by the inter-rater who holds a PhD degree in English and is an expert in conversational analysis. The expert will receive records of students' group discussions in a DVD form and the transcription of students' group interaction in a written form.

Video Recordings of Participants' Group Discussion

The video recordings helped the researcher to see more details of teaching instructions, students' interactions, and learning atmospheres in the classroom and were used as the back-up to support the findings.

Teacher Journal

After each class ended, the researcher (as the instructor) wrote a journal to record details as follows: problems that occurred during the class, students' IC improvement, and students' weak points. The journal records were also used to support and expand the research findings.

In this research, the scaffolding intervention was divided into 3 stages: 1) orientation, 2) during intervention, and 3) after intervention. The framework is adapted from Clark and Graves(2005) and Brown and Broemmel (2011) scaffolding frameworks. The processes of each stage are being described in the table below.

Table 1 Scaffolding Framework

| Stage 1: Orientation | Stage 2: During Intervention | Stage 3: After Intervention |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduce a topic and relating the topic to students' lives ■ Motivate students to think along and participate ■ Help students recall prior background knowledge ■ Give demonstration ■ Pre-teaching concepts and suggesting strategies ■ Simplify lessons ■ Provide supportive materials such as handouts, video clips, or pictures to increase students' understanding ■ Give support as needed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ask students to present their findings ■ Ask students to negotiate meaning (predict, compare & contrast, prove the effectiveness, discuss the feasibility, etc.) ■ Ask students to give reasons and supportive examples ■ Ask students to think beyond the context and discuss to reflect reality and share opinions within their cultures. ■ Give support as needed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build connection to bridge students' prior knowledge to new knowledge they have learned. ■ Conclude the discussion and highlight the consensus/mutual agreement ■ Provide feedbacks ■ Re-teach if needed ■ Evaluate the students' performance |

Results

Among the four criterions (1) turn taking, 2) repair, 3) overlaps and interruptions, and 4) topic management), scaffolding played important role in developing participants' interactional competence in terms of topic management the most. Participants were able to produce more logical and meaningful utterances as the examples shown as follows:

To illustrate the participants' utterances, the capital letters were used to represent the participants' names and the symbols were used. The explanation of each symbol is described below:

- = = To signify obvious pausing of an ongoing utterances
- ? = To indicate rising intonation
- / / = To show overlaps and interruptions
- ... = To indicate that the current utterances are not yet ended

4.1) Participants were able to give clear examples to support their points.

Example 1 Topic: Ebook vs traditional book

D: For me= in my opinion= Ebook is better than traditional book *because=er=it's comfortable you can download the file or the book into your phone= and you can read everywhere*

M: Yes I agree with her with him= *it's so convenient= yes=when I want to read= and if*

you can download er=TOEIC with er=Ebook program er=you will have a file with er=sound

D: /Sound audio/

M: Yes= yes=sound audio=it's convenient and....

N: /Yes for me I agree with M and D= because the Ebook= *nowadays people usually use Ebooker= people read= traditional book less and less because= it's hard to carry/*

Note: From the example, the participants' supporting points have been italicized to describe why they prefer Ebook more than traditional book.

4.2) Participants did not only discuss about the problems, but they could also make suggestions to mitigate the mentioned problems.

Example 2 Topic: Problem and solution of social media

N: For me= er example=I was seller on Facebook= er=I sell cream and lotion and I have customer order and send fake slip for me=but I don't know it's fake and I send product for her and er=another case customer send real slip but seller don't send product for her um it's too bad that's it and= have your guys know how to deal with it

A: I think nowadays has many way for protect about your business er= that I will show example if you want to sure for the customer send money for you=you can choose have er=application for the banking=can check your money come already before you send the product for customer= I think is the good idea if you want to do your business good = anyone have more idea?

S: Er=I think I agree with A er=you should check your notification on your phone er= before you send product er=make sure that your customer er=send money to you yes

Note: The italic part shows the solution A suggested how to check the fake slip when selling product on social media.

4.3) Participants were able to produce more complex utterances by discussing the cause and effect, and using more complex vocabulary.

Example 3 Topic: Should wild animal stay wild

Su: Ok let's start err=first err=every everyone think follow me=should wild animal be keep in the zoo?=Should wild animal be keep err=be keep at the cage for sell?=Should wild animal=should wild animal be keep in **captivity** this is err=no! =wild animal should stay wild!

Class: Yeahhh

Su: Wild animal generally live in the forest=they live with their **instinct**=and people bring wild animal to the area=their instinct they like to run=they like to walk in the big area= do you think that make the problem?

P: And when you=when you keep these animals as pets=when you bring them out from the wild=sometime you have to stay carefully you know=not like any other pets they are dangerous=and can you really keep something that dangerous with you all time? what happen if you I don't know like=yes=snake you have a pet snake right?=They come from the wild=and you keep in your house but what happen if it escapes? What happen if it leaves your house and get into other places=it could bite or even kill right?= These animals they don't have responsibility=they not just like any other pets you know=they not domestic=that the reason why they call wild animals

Note: The italic part shows the effects when we keep wild animals as pets whereas the bold words show the more complex vocabulary participants used in their discussion.

4.4) Participants achieved to elaborate the information they researched and discussed such information in the group discussion spontaneously and appropriately.

Example 4 Topic: Should government provide shelters for homeless

N: Ok for me= the government= must support them= because *according to the constitution of the kingdom of Thailand 2017= section55 announced that= the state shall ensure that the people receive efficient public health service universally*=it means everyone should get it= It's the reason why government= must= support them.

Note: The participant referred to the constitution article to support his reason why the government must take care the homeless and other citizens equally.

Moreover, students showed great improvement in turn-taking as the example shown as follows:

4.5) Participants were able to organize their discussion and make it easier for the audiences to understand and follow their ideas by using the transitions.

Example 5 Topic: Should wild animal stay wild

P: *So the first question* is err please share problems about wild animals we know. Do any of you know any problem about these wild animal?

N: Err and *the next question* is why did people killed or attacked wild animals?

Note: Participants used the transitions 'first' and 'next' to organize their discussion to be more understandable.

4.6) The turn taking in each group was less dominated by the group leader and each member in the group produced number of turns quite similarly and not very different as what happened in the first two sessions of scaffolding. The majority of students in each

group had more opportunities to take turns and hence had more opportunities to express and exchange their ideas with other group members.

Example 6 Topic: Home schooling versus traditional school

S:ok next question = err the pros and cons of homeschooling

P: I want to share

S: ok

P: cons from homeschooling= you you have fully time to be with your family and daily life= learn learning and developing yourself= it's have not err= start of semester or= and and= the end of semester= but I err from experience= which err family can create activities to child to learn= it is better than try to learn ณณ book and...

TT: from books

P: from books

T: and pros I think the pros of homeschooling= like I was mention= the homeschooling children they really do what they really interested= but for the traditional school= they just read the book and learning by memorize= but the homeschooling they learning by understanding= or they won't understand forever yeah= because they understand and they can do= *any ideas*?

S: I think I have pros yeah= err pro is= you you can learn of experience new thing that it can useful in your reality life yes= and like everything that happen in your life outside the classroom= it's useful for the future

P: *hey Pattama= how do you think about* cons of homeschooling

Pat: about cons ok= ((laughed))= I think if if your children err= you learn from the parents right?= if you have a problem with your parents= you= I think you err= you not...

S: pay attention

Pat: yes= you not pay attention with your parents= and you just don't understand= err about the parents teach you

A: some parents not have enough information for teach= err they don't know= they don't know really in some story= so when they teach children sometimes

S: and err= yes= cons= you have less friends= I don't think that student who do homeschooling have no friends at all but they have less friends like one two or three yes= and some somehow= it's= it's pretty difficult to meet new err= society= new people and make friend yes= ok for the last question.....

Note: From the given example, all group members (S, P, T, Pat, and A) participated in sharing the pros and cons of homeschooling. They took turns spontaneously and timely to share ideas and they helped each other when they encountered problems in giving explanations. They also helped S (the group leader) to decrease burdens in leading the group. For example, T and P assisted S in turn passing as the evidence shown in italic form. A helped Pat expand her points about the cons of homeschooling that this alternative may not be

effective if the parents did not have good relationship with their children or if they were not knowledgeable in a particular field.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that students showed improvements in turn taking and topic management better than other aspects. In terms of turn taking, scaffolding opened rooms for students to exchange ideas and interact mutually. They also learned to compromise when disagreements occurred. Through peer learning, they learned to give examples and initiated other group members to prove or explain their points. In terms of topic management, students learned to organize their ideas before delivering in a more logical way. Scaffolding also helped them solve the problem of lacking of ideas since they had a chance to do some research before presenting their ideas. Most importantly, they paid attention to their friends' discussion and helped correct any mistakes created by peers or the individual.

Discussion

It is hoped that this research will help EFL English teachers to gain more understanding of interactional competence (IC) and scaffolding instructions. To apply scaffolding as a teaching method, teachers are required to have well-preparation of the teaching framework and sufficient understanding of scaffolding instructions and knowledge of the subjects taught. Teachers need to be sensitive to students' limitations and weaknesses so they can assist students more effectively when they encountered any difficulties or challenges in doing future activities.

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