

*In the name of God*  
*The Compassionate, the*  
*Merciful*

University of Guilan  
Faculty of Literature and Humanities  
English Language Department

**Mediating Intermediate EFL Learners' Writing through Peer  
Scaffolding and its Impact on their Writing Fluency**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
Master of Arts Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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# *Dedicated*

*To my lovely parents for their support and encouragement*

*To my dear friend for her constant companionship*

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## Abstract

### **Mediating Intermediate EFL Learners' Writing through Peer Scaffolding and its Impact on their Writing Fluency**

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The present study had two major aims. Its primary aim was to examine the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of a group of intermediate EFL learners. In addition, addressing the gap in literature it aimed to discover what scaffolding behaviors are used in the planning and drafting phases of writing process, and what the students' attitudes are toward peer scaffolding and process writing. To these ends, 40 homogenous freshmen studying at the University of Guilan were the participants of the study who were randomly divided into a control group (N=20), and an experimental group comprising 10 dyads in which a competent writer provided scaffolding to a less competent one using process approach to writing. Data was collected through pre- and post-tests of argumentative essay writing, the recording of dyadic interactions, and a questionnaire. Following Wigglesworth and Storch (2009), in this study writing fluency was measured by taking into account average number of words, clauses, and T-units. Also, Chenoweth and Hayes' (2001) measurement, namely 'the number of words written per minute' was used. The results of ANOVA test for the analysis of argumentative essays revealed that learners in the experimental group did not outperform those in the control group in terms of writing fluency. However, repeated measures ANOVA showed that less competent writers in the experimental group had considerably improved in their writing fluency after the experiment. In addition, microgenetic analysis of one dyad's talks revealed that scaffolding behaviors used in the planning and drafting phases of writing were more or less the same as those utilized in the revision phase. Two other scaffolding behaviors namely 'simplification' and 'directing' were also identified in the present study. Moreover, the results of attitude questionnaire demonstrated that although the students preferred to write individually, they had a positive attitude toward process writing and peer scaffolding. These findings can have several pedagogical implications for both EFL learners and writing teachers.

**Keywords:** academic writing; peer scaffolding; Sociocultural Theory; microgenetic analysis; writing fluency; EFL.

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## **Abbreviations**

- EFL:** English as a Foreign Language
- ESL:** English as a Second Language
- FL:** Foreign Language
- MLE:** Mediated Learning Experience
- SCT:** Sociocultural Theory
- SL:** Second Language
- SPSS:** Statistical Package of Social Sciences
- TEFL:** Teaching English as a Foreign Language
- TESL:** Teaching English as a Second Language
- ZPD:** Zone of Proximal Development

**CHAPTER ONE**

**INTRODUCTION**

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Preview

In recent years, the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (TESL/TEFL) has witnessed a change in theoretical and methodological perspectives from considering foreign language learning as an individual accomplishment to understanding it as a social act. Particularly, interaction and its subcomponents such as collaboration and scaffolding have been the concern of numerous researchers (Ferreira, 2008).

As a result of considerable attention to collaboration and scaffolding, the construct of *mediation* which is central to the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of Vygotsky (1981, 1986; Lantolf, 2000a) provided a means of studying social processes involved in situated language learning and use (Gibbons, 2003). Moreover, Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) have become two of the main concepts in L2 learning studies. Initially used by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) in an analysis of children-tutor interaction, scaffolding was soon associated with Vygotsky's notion of ZPD. The concept of scaffolding is derived from cognitive psychology and research in L1, and it refers to the supportive conditions made by a knowledgeable participant in a social interaction (Donato, 1994).

Scaffolding and its relationship to FL/SL learning has been studied in different aspects of interaction such as teacher-student or student-student interaction, the latter being also called peer scaffolding. A substantial amount of research has been conducted to discover the value and effectiveness of pair or group activities in foreign or second language learning in general and writing skill in particular. The first researcher who utilized the concept of mutual scaffolding on peer interaction is Donato (1994). Since then, a number of studies (Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; DiCamilla & Antón, 1997; Antón, 1999; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Ohta, 1995, 2000, 2001) have acknowledged the potential benefits of mutual scaffolding to learning.

Many of the above-mentioned studies and a number of others have been concerned with the scaffolding behaviors of peers during the revision phase of the writing process. In addition, as is stated by Mirzaee, Domakani and Roshani (2010), Sociocultural concepts have been a matter of neglect in Iran and most of the studies have been concerned with linguistic, cognitive and affective aspects of second language acquisition. Although, a few recent studies in our context have examined scaffolding behaviors of L2 learners while they are engaged in

revising their drafts (Mirzaee, Domakani & Roshani, 2010; Rezaei, 2012), up to the present time, no study has investigated the scaffolding behaviors of L2 learners in the planning or drafting phases of the writing process. In addition, there is scarcity of research exploring the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of EFL/ESL learners.

Therefore, the present study aims at investigating the impact of peer scaffolding on the writing fluency of intermediate EFL learners and also exploring scaffolding behaviors of EFL learners during the planning and drafting phases of writing so that a clearer understanding could be achieved about the mechanisms of pair work and peer scaffolding.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In spite of many researches done in the realm of ESL/EFL writing pedagogy, it is still one of the most difficult areas for language learners. One of the difficulties that most of the EFL learners complain or ask about when they are required to write an essay or composition, is the amount or quantity of their writings. This point reveals that learners have problems in generating ideas and organizing their thoughts. Nowadays, writing is viewed as a social process rather than an individual accomplishment. As Young and Miller (2004) indicate, by incorporating the principles of SCT with its emphasis on co-construction of knowledge, L2 writing can be regarded as a co-writing practice whereby all participants engaged in a discursive practice can change their patterns of social participation within their ZPD, and the supportive interaction in peer writing can provide the ground for further development in individual writing skills.

Scaffolding can be conducted either by teachers or peers. There are often a great many students in a single class and the teacher cannot help each individual learner separately. Also due to the difficulties that most EFL learners face when writing individually, it seems to be more practical to engage the learners in pair writing during which more competent peers scaffold and guide less competent ones.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This study is intended to offer insights into theory and practice that underlie effective writing instruction at university level. Concerning theory, this research project may contribute to filling the gap in current literature regarding what scaffolding behaviors are used during planning and drafting phases of writing process. In addition, as the focus of study is on argumentative genre, it can also add to the body of knowledge regarding peer writing using argumentative genre.

Considering practice, for writing teachers who have found their students unwilling to write in English, this study with its focus on pair writing and peer scaffolding might serve as a

stimulus to help teachers especially in the Iranian EFL context to reflect upon conducting this approach which is blended with process writing in their writing classrooms as a substitution for the traditional product approach. Furthermore, for those who are skeptical about the incorporation of process approach and peer scaffolding, the findings of this study may provide concrete examples and analysis to show what some of the problems with utilizing these approaches are and also how they can probably be solved.

### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The notion of scaffolding is increasingly applied to EFL/ESL writing classes, and much is known about teacher or peer mediators helping student writers revise their composition. However, there is a gap in literature regarding scaffolding strategies used by peers in the planning phase of writing, and also in the drafting phase when learners start writing what they have planned on the paper. Also, not much research is done in the area of writing fluency. Therefore, this study has two main objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to investigate the impact of peer scaffolding on the writing performance of the learners in terms of their fluency in writing. On the other hand, it aims at shedding light on the scaffolding behaviors of Iranian intermediate EFL learners during the planning and drafting phases of writing argumentative essays and their attitudes toward peer scaffolding and process approach to writing. As a result, the specific research objectives are to:

1. Find out the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of intermediate EFL learners;
2. Find out the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of more and less competent intermediate EFL writers;
3. Explore the scaffolding behaviors of intermediate EFL learners in the planning and drafting stages of writing process;
4. Explore intermediate EFL learners' attitudes toward peer scaffolding and process approach to writing.

### **1.5 Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This research is going to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of intermediate EFL learners?
- 2- What is the impact of peer scaffolding on writing fluency of more and less competent intermediate EFL writers?
- 3- What are the scaffolding behaviors of intermediate EFL learners during the planning and drafting phases of the writing process?
- 4- What are the attitudes of intermediate EFL learners toward peer scaffolding and process approach to writing?

The following null hypotheses have been formulated for research questions number 1 and 2:

H<sub>0</sub>1. Peer scaffolding has no impact on writing fluency of intermediate EFL learners.

H<sub>0</sub>2. Peer scaffolding has no impact on writing fluency of more and less competent intermediate EFL writers.

## **1.6 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

There are some limitations in this study which prevent definite acceptance of conclusions reached in it. First, regarding the participants of the study it can be said that they are not a representative sample of Iranian EFL learners, since they were all freshmen, and the number of participants (N=40) was relatively small having twenty learners in each group respectively. Secondly, the fact that the whole study took only eight weeks did not allow much flexibility with data collection. Accordingly, having a few treatment sessions is another limitation of the study. The third limitation refers to the issue of subjectivity in transcribing students' talks for the purpose of microgenetic analysis as facial expressions and gestures cannot be seen for transcribing. However, this was partly compensated by researchers' direct observation of students' interactions.

Moreover, for the purpose of narrowing down the scope of the study and controlling the extraneous variables a number of delimitations were incorporated by the researcher. First, it was tried to focus only on one writing genre namely argumentative writing as it is necessary for university students to be able to argue both orally and in written form at their classes which are thought as both academic and social forums. Secondly, only students at intermediate level with similar educational background majoring in the same field of study were selected as participants of the study. Moreover, it was tried to randomly assign students to each group. Thirdly, although the course was 'grammar and writing', it was tried not to teach any explicit grammar lesson. Nevertheless, in order to satisfy students' expectations grammatical points were referred to in the comments made by the teacher in students' essays written in each session for both control and experimental group.

## **1.7 Definition of the Key Terms**

### **1.7.1 Mediation**

Lantolf (2000a) believes that mediation "is understood to be the introduction of an auxiliary device into an activity that then links human to the world of objects or the world of mental behavior"(p.418). This auxiliary device can be either through the use of specific tools or through human mediation. In this study, mediation is defined and operated by means of



human interaction, mostly through the assistance that competent writers provide for less competent writers.

### **1.7.2 Scaffolding**

As cited in Walqui (2006), Bruner (1983) defines scaffolding as: “a process of ‘setting up’ the situation to make the child’s entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it.” (p.60)

In this study scaffolding has been regarded as the help and support which is provided by competent peers as they are engaged in writing argumentative essays in dyads. In other words, when competent writers help less competent ones in different phases of the writing process, they are involved in the process of scaffolding.

### **1.7.3 Peer Scaffolding**

Scaffolding metaphor was broadened by Donato’s (1994) introduction of collective scaffolding with his emphasis on collaboration between peers. As Boblett (2012) indicates, Donato (1994) argued that there should be an expansion of the dyad, as a central component of scaffolding, to include learner to learner or *peer scaffolding*. Guerrero and Villamil (2000) define peer scaffolding as those supportive behaviors by which one partner in a mediated interactive situation can help another achieve higher levels of competence.

Thus, in the present study peer scaffolding is defined as the social interaction in which dyads comprising of a competent writer and a less competent writer interact with each other and as a result of this interaction an individual learns to extend his or her competence through the guidance of a more experienced or more competent individual writer.

### **1.7.4 Fluency**

Fluency is defined by Binder (1996; cited in Moghaddam, 2011) as a combination of accuracy plus speed of response that enables competent individuals to function efficiently and effectively in their natural environments. Fluency has also been described as a combination of quality plus pace (Haughton, 1980, cited in Moghaddam, 2011). As is evident from these definitions, fluency is a subjective measure.

### **1.7.5 Writing Fluency**

Defining language fluency and particularly “writing fluency” is a controversial issue. According to Brand and Brand (2006), the general meaning of fluency is defined as completing an activity or a task effortlessly so that students complete activities or tasks “automatically, fluidly, rapidly, quickly, and accurately” (p. 2, cited in Ju, 2010).

Considering what was quoted above, in the present study writing fluency is defined quantitatively as being able to write more in a time constraint. The quality of writing was also

paid attention to by giving credence to accuracy of writing in excluding the inappropriate words or ungrammatical structures in the measurement of the writing fluency.

### **1.7.6 Argumentative Writing**

Academic writing especially at university level is isomorphic with argumentative writing and it is distinct from other writing genres such as expository and narrative writing with regard to the features of audience and the use of language (Kinneavy, 1994; Perelman, 1982, cited in Tsai, 2006).

Argumentative writing addresses a controversial issue, in which a position is taken, reasons and supporting ideas are presented, potential counterargument is offered, and refutation is considered (Tsai, 2006).

Since the composition of argumentation is a crucial intellectual move, and university students need to learn how to argue in order to successfully take part in discussions in their classes at university, this genre was chosen to be taught and practiced in the present study.

## **1.8 Organization of the Thesis**

The present thesis is organized in five chapters. The first chapter was an introduction to the thesis, highlighting the objectives and rationale of the research focus, as well as identifying statement of the problem, significance of the study, and research questions and hypotheses.

In order to provide the theoretical backbone of the study and also to place the thesis in a broader context of research in L2 writing, the first section of chapter two presents an account of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory and particularly the constructs related to the thesis. The second part of chapter two includes the review of some related studies about peer scaffolding and writing fluency.

In chapter three, a thorough description of the methodological background of the study will be presented focusing on the participants, instruments, data elicitation procedure and also data analysis.

Chapter four reports on and discusses the quantitative and qualitative results of the empirical study. At first, regarding the primary objectives of the study the results of statistical analyses about writing fluency will be delineated. Then, the results of microgenetic analysis of participants' interactions will be presented. At last, the results of the attitude questionnaire are reported and discussed.

Chapter five concludes the thesis by reference to each research question and drawing appropriate conclusions out of the results. The chapter is closed by discussing the pedagogical implications of the research as well as proposing suggestions for further research.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

## Chapter two

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the first section is devoted to establishing the theoretical background of the study by providing an overview of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (SCT) as it relates to education and learning, and its contrast to Cognitive Theory of Piaget. Then two major elements of Vygotsky's SCT namely Mediation, and Zone of Proximal Development will be explored. After that it is tried to present a comprehensive overview of Scaffolding and its key features. The theoretical section will close by giving an explanation about process approach to writing and its contrast to product approach. The second section of this chapter is concerned with providing a review of the existing literature on scaffolding with an emphasis on peer scaffolding and the studies related to writing fluency.

#### 2.2 An Overview of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is an approach to human sciences with the purpose of explaining and developing a connection between mental functioning and the cultural, institutional and historical conditions in which mental functioning happens (Van Lier, 2004; cited in Pishghadam & Ghadiri, 2011). In addition, SCT directly emphasizes the link between the social context and individuals' psychological development (Bruffee, 1993, 1996; Gere, 1987; cited in Tsai, 2006).

Central to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is the assumption that the understanding of individual mental functioning begins with the understanding of social life (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky (1978, 1981 & 1987) is fundamentally concerned with the thesis that the development of human cognitive functions proceeds from the social or interpsychological plane to the individual or intrapsychological plane, with the use of symbolic, socioculturally developed tools the most important of which is language. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory has had a great impact on the fields of education. Although he does not neglect the significant roles of biological factors in the development of human beings' mental process, he firmly acknowledges the paramount role of sociocultural factors in the development of mental process.

In SCT, learning is considered as a social event which takes place as a consequence of interaction between the learner and the environment in which he or she is carrying out a task (Fahim& Haghani, 2012). In other words, SCT regards human mental functioning as