
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teacher Scaffolding and Collaborative Learning in Public Speaking: Voices of Students

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| ABSTRACT

In spite of the prevalence of public speaking courses at tertiary level, it remains a challenge for many English as a Second language (ESL) learners. Collaborative learning strategies have been employed to support students in learning this skill. Various factors contribute to the success of collaborative learning in public speaking; however, the role teacher scaffolding has received limited research attention. As a response, this study examined undergraduate students in a Vietnamese university who took part in a 15-session public speaking course to investigate their perceptions of this issue. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and the process of theme analysis, findings indicated the role of teacher scaffolding and factors that influence its effectiveness in collaborative activities in a public speaking course from students' perspective. The study also suggested pedagogical implications for enhancing the learning process.

| KEYWORDS

public speaking, collaborative learning, teacher scaffolding, English as a Second language (ESL).

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Communication is recognized as an essential skill for learners of the 21st century, alongside critical thinking, collaboration and creativity (Partnership For 21st Century Skills, 2009). According to Ebenezer et al. (2022), public speaking has become a critical competency that students at tertiary level must develop and master. Many university programs in Vietnam have currently included public speaking courses in their curriculum. However, regarded as a combination of organizing, delivering and controlling the flow (Griffin, 2018), as well as an environment that invites judgement for both ideas and appearances (Madzlan et al., 2020), public speaking remains a challenge for many individuals. In English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, public speaking is an even greater fear (Ebenezer et al., 2022) since it demands not only critical thinking, novelty, and rationality but also a high level of English competency (Lucas, 2013).

Collaborative learning has been proved to enhance ESL learners' communication skills and academic performance in public speaking (Liao, 2014) by fostering a supportive, low-stress environment (Pattanpichet, 2011). This approach enhances speaking competence and reduces speaking-related anxiety by allowing learners to openly share perspectives with peers (Osman & Nayan, 2010). However, working with peers also presents challenges for students in managing and tailoring their learning progress (Molenaar et al., 2014). Therefore, by providing them support, which is defined as 'scaffolding' (Chang et al., 2002), teachers play an important role in promoting productive students' collaboration (Chan, 2020; Molenaar et al., 2014).

There have been a wide range of research exploring the role of teacher scaffolding in collaborative learning (Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023; LelanieBasco & Nickle, 2019; Such, 2021; Van De Pol et al., 2010); however, studies focusing on public speaking, particularly from the learner's perspective, remain limited. (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). This study, therefore, aims to address the issue by investigating the perception of Vietnamese ESL learners in higher education in on how teacher scaffolding supports their collaborative learning activities in public speaking classrooms. The findings of this study could offer guidance for teachers on how to make their scaffolding techniques become more effective, helping to create a more supportive and engaging learning experience.

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2. Literature Review

Collaborative Learning in Public Speaking classes

In terms of socio-cultural learning theory, Vygotsky (1978) highlights that learning progress happens through students' social interactions with others. This belief places a strong emphasis on the connection of collaboration and personal cognitive development, which is supported by numerous social scientists. Richards (1990) claims that learning can be promoted efficiently through pair work and group works. Likewise, Lantof and Thorne (2006) agree that interaction is the main cause of learning. Findings of various studies show that students engaging in group works often grasp more of the knowledge and retain it for a longer period compared to other instructional approaches (Pattanpichet, 2011).

In this tradition, collaborative learning, defined as a pedagogical approach that provides students with opportunities to engage with peers either in groups or pairs (Babiker, 2018), has long been incorporated in classrooms by educators to improve students' understanding (Liao, 2014). In higher education, collaborative learning presents valuable potential to encourage active engagement and build student autonomy (Foote, 2009 as cited in Pattanpichet, 2011). According to (Govindasamy & Shah, 2020), collaborative activities encouraging learners to come up with ideas, discuss them, get quick feedback, and reply to queries and remarks, which allow them to acquire important problem-solving abilities. According to Pattenpichet (2011), collaborative learning is also acknowledged for its ability to boost learner satisfaction.

Previous studies have reported that collaborative learning is able to strengthen ESL learners' comprehensive communication skills (Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2009; Liao, 2014; Prichard & Ashleigh, 2007). In public speaking, collaborative learning has shown to enhance learners' academic achievement (Liao, 2014). One of the key reasons is that collaboration fosters a supportive and stress-free learning environment (Pattanpichet, 2011), which positively influences students' speaking competence (Nurhayatin et al., n.d.). In addition, through discussion with peers, ESL learners are allowed to share their perspectives openly, which helps to reduce speaking-related anxiety (Osman & Nayan, 2010). Findings from various studies show that collaborative learning promotes improvement in grammar and pronunciation (Govindasamy & Shah, 2020), which helps to enhance fluency and accuracy in spoken language production of ESL learners (Babiker, 2018).

Scaffolding

Vygotsky (1978) also proposes a concept named Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with support, which is also called 'scaffolding' (Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023). In other words, scaffolding indicates the assistance provided to help a learner complete tasks that they would find challenging on their own (Ouyang et al., 2021). It should be noted that scaffolding can be offered by teachers or even by more knowledgeable peers (LelanieBasco & Nickle, 2019). However, within the scope of this research, the focus is solely on teacher scaffolding.

Scaffolding helps learners build on their prior knowledge and integrate new material more easily (Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023). When scaffolding aligns with learners' satisfaction, they express a greater sense of responsibility for their learning and find more opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). In ESL classrooms, educators can utilize various scaffolding techniques including questioning, modeling, providing feedback, gradual release, and utilizing graphic organizers to aid the learning progress of students (Feng, 2023). However, it is noticeable that scaffolding is a flexible, adaptive support strategy that varies based on the task type and student responses, meaning it cannot be applied the same way in all situations (Van De Pol et al., 2010).

Conceptual framework for applying teacher scaffolding in collaborative activities in public speaking classrooms

The current study draws on Walqui (2006)'s conceptual framework of scaffolding structure. Walqui (2006) suggests that scaffolding can be performed through three pedagogical 'scales': first, as a support framework that enables the development of specific skills and activities; second, as the execution of targeted activities within the classroom; and third, as the real-time assistance provided during interactions.

In a Public Speaking classroom, tasks are structured to help students confidently speak in front of an audience and convey messages that are clear, credible, and resonate with the public (Hamilton, 2009). Based on this idea, the study has employed the Walqui's framework, adapting it to the learning environment of public speaking (see Diagram 1)

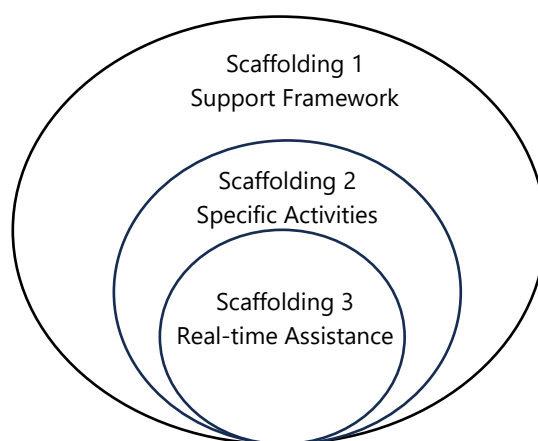


Diagram 1. Conceptual framework of scaffolding

The largest scale, scaffolding 1, is called Support Framework. This level is about the larger, planned structure for learning over time. It includes a series of connected tasks, projects, or consistent classroom routines that help students build skills progressively. The second level of Scaffolding 2, which is called Specific Activities, focuses on how teachers support students during individual activities. If Scaffolding 1 is the entire course or project, Scaffolding 2 is a particular activity within it. This includes the specific steps, prompts, or instructions that help students engage in a single task effectively and build on previous knowledge. The Real-time Assistance scaffolding scale is the moment-to-moment support teachers provide as students work through tasks, like immediate feedback or questions to guide thinking. Here, scaffolding is a live, interactive process that supports students as they work, helping them make adjustments or deepen their understanding through real-time guidance.

Together, these three levels form a comprehensive scaffolding approach, moving from a broad, planned curriculum (Scaffolding 1) to task-specific guidance (Scaffolding 2), and finally to direct, interactive support during learning (Scaffolding 3). Each level builds on the previous one to create a supportive environment that enables students to develop skills and knowledge more effectively.

This study aims to investigate the perception of ESL learners in higher education on how instructional scaffolding supports their collaborative learning activities in public speaking classrooms by addressing the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. How do students perceive the role of teacher scaffolding in enhancing their collaborative learning experience in a public speaking course?

RQ2. What factors affect the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding in collaborative learning activities in a public speaking course?

3. Methodology

Participants

This study involved a total of 15 participants who are all first-year students of a university in Vietnam. The group consisted of 8 females and 7 males. The Public Speaking is a compulsory module of the bachelor's program. All students of the class have achieved an overall IELTS score of 5.5 or above, which is equivalent to Level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Cambridge Assessment English, 2019). At this level, students are classified as independent users who are capable of fluent, spontaneous interaction with native speakers and effectively expressing opinions on various topics (Council of Europe, 2001).

Setting

The course comprised 15 sessions with 150 minutes for each, designed to develop students' public speaking skills. It covered various types of speeches, including informative, persuasive, and special occasion speeches, alongside techniques for crafting impactful openings, conclusions, and well-structured main bodies. Each session included a range of interactive activities and tasks that encouraged students to work collaboratively in groups.

Methods and Procedures

With the aim of exploring students' perception on the topic, a qualitative method was employed in the study as it facilitated the process of obtaining participants' subjective opinions (Creswell, 2013). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the course since this type of method of data collection fostered relationships between the researcher and the interviewees (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and allowed them to share their thoughts openly without being restricted by

predetermined questions (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Each interview was recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed manually for detailed analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Result

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze interview data, following the six phrases suggested by Braun and Clark (2012). At the first stage, transcripts were read thoroughly by the researcher with notes being taken. After that, codes were generated and revised from the data. Through constant coding and comparison, the research started searching for key themes. The data is then further analyzed to produce a comprehensive set of themes that address the research questions. In the final phase, researchers wrote a report based on these themes, supported by direct quotes from the interview data.

Each student in the study was labeled with a code beginning with "S" and a consecutive number, for example, S1, S2, S3, and so on. The findings are organized into themes aligned with the study's research questions.

Research Question 1: How do students perceive the role of teacher scaffolding in enhancing their collaborative learning experience in a public speaking course?

Facilitating understanding and engagement

Participants mentioned the importance of teacher scaffolding in clarifying and giving examples, which helped them to distinguish different types of speeches as well as understand various criteria of a good speech. Students S1, S4, and S6 expressed:

S1: "When the teacher clarify the question, it helps us understand what we need to do."

S4: "Sometimes we could not imagine exactly what I have to do to deliver a good speech. For example, we do not know what to include and what to leave out in my speech. The examples the teacher provides clears up a lot of confusion for us."

S6: "My teacher gave me examples of the same topic in both persuasive and informative speeches, and I know how to recognize them right away"

Interviewees also mentioned about the role of teacher in offering ideas and suggestions when they felt stuck during brainstorming. They emphasized that this was extremely useful when it comes to creativity of public speaking. One participant shared:

S10: "It is important to make my speech sound impressive, so I try to think of creative ideas. However, brainstorming is the most difficult part for me. Sometimes the teacher just needs to give me a little hint and I can continue doing it right away."

Enhancing Group Dynamics

Teacher scaffolding was seen as vital in resolving conflicts and promoting collaboration within groups. Feedback from teachers about group dynamics and support in task distribution contributed to a positive working environment. These were illustrated as followed:

S4: "We are all students of the same age and level, so sometimes no one listens to each other, many problems need the teacher's intervention."

S15: "Many times, one person does not understand the instructions of the tasks given, but even though everyone says so, that person doesn't believe it. We all need the lecturer's confirmation."

Teacher Feedback as a Role Model for Improvement

Participants highlighted the importance of reliable feedback from teachers in guiding their improvement in public speaking. They noted that teacher feedback not only builds their confidence but also serves as a role model for how to provide constructive and effective feedback. Student S3 shared that:

S3: "When the teacher gives feedback, it's clear and helpful. It shows me how I should give feedback to my classmates. I feel like I learn from the way the teacher explains things."

Research Question 2: What factors affect the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding in collaborative learning activities in a public speaking course?

Teachers' Personality

When asked about elements influence the success of teacher scaffolding, students highlighted the importance of teachers' personal traits, such as friendliness or approachable. One student mentioned:

S1: "If teachers are not friendly, I will hesitate to ask questions."

S8: *"Many teachers just sit at their desks, so I am too shy to run up and ask. If teachers walk around and show some signals such as smiling, I will think they are ready to support me."*

Teachers' Expertise

According to 4 out of 15 students, teacher expertise, demonstrated through knowledge and pedagogical skills, was regarded as an essential factor in effective scaffolding. Some students shared:

S9: *"In public speaking, we expect the teacher to be a good speaker and knowledgeable, [...] they can give us tips and advice"*

S10: *"[...] when it comes to different strategies in different types of speeches, we expect the teacher to be able to model it."*

Group Diversity

Participants also expressed that differences in individual personalities, academic abilities, and learning preferences within a group lead to differing levels of understanding and implementation of the teacher's support.

S1: *"When our teacher gave us the guide, I focused on breaking it down step-by-step, but some of my group members just started brainstorming ideas without much structure. It was a bit challenging to work together at first."*

S18: *"I needed examples to understand the task better, but one of my peers said examples weren't necessary and preferred to figure it out independently."*

4.2. Discussion

The findings of the study emphasize positive perceptions of students on teacher scaffolding in collaborative learning activities in a public speaking course. Teacher scaffolding allows students comprehend and engage in public speaking tasks effectively. Specifically, techniques like clarifying abstract concepts, providing examples, and offering brainstorming ideas help them learn different types of public speaking and prepare impactful speeches. These findings align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) emphasizing the role of guided assistance in bridging students' current and potential abilities. Teacher scaffolding was also identified as an essential factor in improving group dynamics during collaborative learning activities. It supports Johnson and Johnson's (2009) findings that teachers' intervention is needed in collaborative learning to assist students in developing interpersonal and group skills, enabling group members to work efficiently together. This is particularly relevant to public speaking context, where tasks such as topic selection, speech organization, and presentation styles can become points of contention, potentially leading to group conflicts that require effective management. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of reliable feedback from teachers in improving their speeches and serving as a role model, providing a foundation for students to give constructive feedback to each other. This insight is similar to findings pointed out by Liu and Aryadoust (2024) that providing teacher feedback before student feedback on public speaking can serve as a model for students to follow, encouraging their reflective thinking and preparing them to offer their own feedback in a more cognitively engaging manner.

Regarding factors that contribute to the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding in collaborative activities in public speaking, students express the belief that teacher's personality and expertise are significantly important. This finding corroborates the ideas of Polk (2006), who suggested that knowledge and personality are two among the ten characteristics that a good teacher should possess. In the context of public speaking, where students are expected to communicate clearly, briefly, and persuasively in different situations (Jean-Pierre et al., 2023), teachers' openness and friendliness when providing scaffolding might encourage them to actively participate, build confidence in their speaking abilities, and develop stronger communication skills. This supportive approach can help students feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and engaging with both their peers and the audience. Since the current study aims to investigate students' perceptions, their preferences regarding what motivates them to learn more effectively are worth considering. The linear relationship between teacher personality traits and students' evaluations of teaching quality has also demonstrated in other research studies (Kim & MacCann, 2018; Patrick, 2011). Apart from that, teachers are expected to have a broad understanding of various types of speeches and their language use to provide students with useful advice. This is a common belief in the process of teaching and learning speaking, which is recognized by not only students in this study also by teachers in the study of Adem and Berkessa (2022). The teachers' ability of modelling is also emphasized by participants, as it is believed to enhance student achievement in various situations (Polk, 2006) including public speaking.

Group diversity, which refers to variants in individual personalities, academic abilities, and learning preferences within a group, also has impacts on the application of teachers' guidance in collaborative activities in the public speaking class. This aligns with various studies' findings which indicated that students at different proficiency levels might have problems when being paired up with (Govindasamy & Shah, 2020; Storch & Aldosari, 2013).

5. Conclusion

The study highlights the importance of teacher scaffolding in fostering effective collaborative learning in public speaking courses from students' perspective. Teacher scaffolding plays a pivotal role in facilitating understanding and engagement, enhancing group

dynamics and giving model feedback for students' collaborative work. From learner's perceptions, teachers' personality, expertise and group diversity contribute significantly to the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding.

In light of the study, to improve the collaborative learning experience of students in public speaking, educators can consider employing strategies such as clarifying abstract concepts and providing examples to help students better understand various types of speeches and the criteria for delivering a good speech. Developing and applying pedagogical skills for grouping students and resolving conflicts in teamwork are also essential. More importantly, instructors should cultivate greater self-awareness of their own personalities and how they are perceived by students to enhance their scaffolding techniques.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, it was conducted on a small scale, with all participants based in one university course Vietnam, which restricts the findings' applicability to other contexts. Secondly, the research relied solely on qualitative data, which limits the scope of analysis and potential generalizability of the results. Future research is recommended to address these limitations by employing a longitudinal design, expanding the scale of the study, and incorporating a mixed-methods approach that includes quantitative data for a more comprehensive analysis.

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