
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teacher Scaffolding and English Language Acquisition among Undergraduate Students: An Application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

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| ABSTRACT

Scaffolding, a term from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), refers to temporary support from more knowledgeable individuals that enables learners to accomplish tasks beyond their independent capabilities. This qualitative case study investigates the role of teacher scaffolding in English language acquisition among undergraduate students at the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development in Ghana. Drawing on Vygotsky's constructs of the ZPD, mediation, and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), the study addresses three research questions: (a) what scaffolding strategies lecturers employ to support students' English language learning, (b) how students perceive the effectiveness of these strategies, and (c) how lecturers' support facilitates movement within students' ZPD. The data were generated through classroom observations (n=2) and semi-structured interviews with lecturers (n=5) and undergraduate students (n=60). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results revealed that lecturers predominantly employed questioning (33%), feedback (20%), prompting (12%), and contextualisation (2%) as scaffolding strategies. Students perceived these strategies as enhancing understanding, encouraging participation, building confidence, and promoting independent learning. The findings demonstrate how contingent, responsive teacher support mediates students' progression from assisted performance towards greater independence in English language use. The study contributes to sociocultural research on second language acquisition in higher education by providing empirical evidence from a Ghanaian university context. The results and recommendations have implications for pedagogical practice, curriculum design, and lecturer professional development.

| KEYWORDS

Scaffolding, Zone of Proximal Development, Sociocultural Theory, Teacher-student interaction, English language acquisition, Ghanaian higher education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

English is the official language of instruction in Ghanaian higher education; therefore, it plays an important role in academic discourse and professional communication (Owu-Ewie, 2006). However, several undergraduate students continue to struggle with academic reading, writing, and oral communication in English (Owusu, 2017). This situation has raised interest in instructional approaches that actively support learners throughout the language learning process. The Ghanaian higher education context presents unique challenges for English language acquisition. Students enter university from diverse linguistic backgrounds, with many having received instruction in English as a second language within multilingual environments (Owu-Ewie, 2006; Owusu, 2017). The transition from senior high to tertiary education demands significantly higher levels of academic literacy. These demands

particularly challenge students who may have had limited exposure to academic English or who come from educational backgrounds where English instruction was inconsistent.

One instructional approach that has received considerable attention in language education is teacher scaffolding (Gibbons, 2015; Walqui, 2006). The concept of scaffolding originates from Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to this theory, learning occurs most effectively when learners receive guidance from a more knowledgeable individual who supports them in performing beyond their present level of ability. This assistance operates within the learner's ZPD, that is, the gap between what the learner can accomplish independently and what can be achieved with guidance. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) ideas, Wood et al. (1976) introduced scaffolding to describe the temporary assistance that enables learners to solve problems and develop new competencies. As learners gain confidence and competence, the support is gradually withdrawn (fading), enabling them to perform tasks independently (Walqui, 2006). Scaffolding has three key features: contingency (support is tailored to the learner's needs), fading (support is gradually withdrawn), and transfer of responsibility (the learner increasingly takes ownership of the task) (Van de Pol et al., 2010).

In English language acquisition, scaffolding may take many forms, which include modelling correct language use, prompting and questioning, providing corrective feedback, simplifying tasks, co-constructing meaning, and gradually withdrawing support as learner competence increases (Gibbons, 2015; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). However, the effectiveness of scaffolding depends on its contingent, responsive nature (Van de Pol & Elbers, 2013).

While scaffolding has been extensively studied in first-language and second-language contexts, less attention has been paid to how lecturers scaffold English language acquisition at the undergraduate level, particularly in Ghanaian universities where English serves as the medium of instruction in multilingual environments. This study addresses that gap by examining scaffolding practices, their perceived effectiveness, and their relationship to movement within students' ZPD in a Ghanaian university context. Therefore, the research objectives of the study are to:

- examine the scaffolding strategies lecturers use to support students' English language learning.
- investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of scaffolding practices in English language learning.
- explore how lecturers' scaffolding supports students' movement within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) during English language learning.

This study contributes to a better understanding of how teacher scaffolding supports English language acquisition among undergraduate students. The findings provide lecturers with insights into effective scaffolding strategies such as guidance, modelling, feedback, and instructional support that can enhance students' language development. The study also enriches the application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in English language teaching and serves as a useful reference for researchers, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to improve English language instruction in Ghanaian universities.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews related literature on teacher scaffolding and English language acquisition among undergraduate students. The review focuses on previous studies on scaffolding and language learning, followed by a discussion of the theoretical foundation of the study – Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Particular attention is given to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), mediation, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and the role of teacher-student interaction in language development.

2.1 Teacher Scaffolding and English Language Learning

Scaffolding is "the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone" (Ellis, 2003, p. 180). Teacher scaffolding has received much attention in research on language learning because of its potential to help learners to perform tasks that may initially be beyond their independent abilities. Wood et al. (1976) introduced the term scaffolding to describe temporary assistance provided by a more knowledgeable person to enable a learner to accomplish a task. It is sometimes referred to as 'assisted performance' (Ohta, 2001). Effective scaffolding requires teachers to respond to learners' changing needs and gradually transfer responsibility to them. According to Damanhour (2021), with the help of asymmetric and symmetric assistance, learners are motivated to complete tasks they could not accomplish alone. Van de Pol et al. (2010) identify contingency, fading, and transfer of responsibility as important characteristics of effective scaffolding. This distinction is important because excessive teacher support may encourage dependence rather than independent language use. Research has generally associated scaffolding with positive language learning outcomes.

A recent systematic review by Mahan and Ruiz de Zarobe (2025), for instance, examined a large body of research on scaffolding in English language learning and reported generally positive outcomes across different language skills. However, the review cautions that the effectiveness of scaffolding depends on how appropriately the support is provided and withdrawn. This observation is particularly relevant to the present study because it seeks to examine specific strategies lecturers employ in English Language acquisition and how students perceive their effectiveness.

2.2 Scaffolding Strategies and Teacher-Student Interaction

Several studies have emphasised the importance of interaction in effective scaffolding. The relationship between the quality of teacher-student interaction and students' engagement is illustrated by Zhang (2023). Zhang examined the relationship between

teacher-student rapport and learner engagement. Using data from 494 participants, the study reported a strong positive relationship between teacher-student rapport and engagement. Although the study was conducted in a Chinese EFL context, it provides useful evidence that the interpersonal dimension of teacher support can influence students' engagement in scaffolded learning.

Owusu et al. (2022), in their discussion of pedagogical strategies for stimulating Long's Interaction Hypothesis in second-language classrooms, emphasise the importance of interaction-oriented pedagogical practices, including strategies that encourage learners to participate actively in oral language development. Their work is useful to the present study because it demonstrates the broader importance of interaction in second-language learning within a Ghanaian context. Amaniampong et al. (2026), in a recent study of teacher feedback practices in L2 classrooms, examined how teachers employ constructive feedback and contrasted teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. Their study highlights the importance of feedback as part of classroom interaction and draws attention to the role of dialogic approaches in supporting learner engagement. This is particularly relevant to the present study because feedback is one of the ways lecturers may mediate students' English language development.

Teacher scaffolding may also involve modelling, task simplification, prompting, and gradual withdrawal of support. These strategies allow lecturers to make difficult language tasks more accessible while still encouraging students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. This principle is consistent with the view of scaffolding as contingent, temporary assistance that should eventually be reduced as learners become more capable (Van de Pol & Elbers, 2013). Taken together, these studies suggest that effective teacher scaffolding is strongly connected to the quality of classroom interaction. The present study, therefore, brings these dimensions together by examining the scaffolding strategies used by lecturers, students' perceptions of their effectiveness, and how such support facilitates movement within students' Zone of Proximal Development.

2.3 Gaps in the Literature

The literature reviewed shows that teacher scaffolding has received considerable attention in language education. However, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing research has been conducted outside the Ghanaian higher-education context, particularly in EFL settings. This limits our understanding of how scaffolding operates within Ghana's multilingual university environment. Second, although some studies have examined scaffolding in Ghanaian educational settings, much of the available work has focused on school-level language teaching or specific language skills, rather than undergraduate students' English language acquisition. For example, Teiku (2022) examined teachers' knowledge and use of scaffolding in reading comprehension lessons, providing useful evidence on scaffolding practices but focusing on a different educational level and language skill.

Third, the reviewed studies do not sufficiently bring together lecturers' scaffolding practices and students' perceptions of those practices. Studies such as Zhang (2023) demonstrate the importance of teacher-student relationships and engagement in scaffolded learning, while Amaniampong et al. (2026) highlight the role of teacher feedback in L2 classrooms. However, there remains a need to examine these forms of support from both the lecturer and student perspectives within a Ghanaian university setting.

Finally, there is limited context-specific research that explicitly interprets teacher scaffolding through Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development among undergraduate English language learners. The present study therefore addresses these gaps by examining the scaffolding strategies lecturers use, investigating students' perceptions of their effectiveness, and exploring how lecturer support facilitates students' movement within the ZPD at the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (USTED), Ghana.

3. Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive development is not the initial stage of social interaction. Vygotsky is of the view that learning occurs through social interaction. Therefore, as the child interacts in social activities, they develop their cognitive domain. This theory asserts that children learn by gradually observing and participating in social activities from birth. Then the internalisation process begins, where the child internalises information around him through interaction. Rather than seeing learning as an activity that occurs solely within the individual, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the role of social interaction, language, and cultural tools in cognitive development. This perspective is particularly relevant to English language acquisition because students develop their language abilities through interaction with teachers and peers. This study draws specifically on the sociocultural perspective: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), Mediation, and Scaffolding. These concepts provide a basis for understanding how lecturers' support can assist undergraduate students in developing their English language abilities.

3.1 The Zone of Proximal Development

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is one of the central concepts in Vygotsky's theory. Learning occurs in the 'zone of proximal development' (Lantolf, 2000). It refers to the difference between what a learner can accomplish independently and what the learner can accomplish with guidance from a more knowledgeable person or a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

The concept is important to the present study because undergraduate students may possess different levels of English language competence. For example, a student may be able to construct simple sentences independently but may struggle to organise a

coherent academic argument. With appropriate guidance from a lecturer, the student may be able to complete the task successfully. The assistance provided operates within the student's ZPD and enables the learner to perform beyond his or her current independent level. In this study, the ZPD therefore provides a basis for examining how lecturers' support facilitates students' movement from assisted performance towards greater independence in English language use.

3.2 The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

The concept of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) refers to the process by which cultural tools like language, signs and symbols, and other people come to stand between the learner and the object of learning, shaping and enabling cognitive activity (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It refers to an individual who possesses greater knowledge or competence in relation to a particular task. In a university English classroom, the lecturer generally occupies this position because of his or her greater knowledge of English language use, academic communication, and the subject being taught. The concept is particularly relevant to this study because the focus is on teacher scaffolding.

3.3 Mediation

Mediation refers to the ways through which learning is supported and shaped by social interaction, language, and culturally available tools. From a sociocultural perspective, learners do not acquire knowledge in isolation. Their learning is mediated through interaction with other people and through the tools available within their social and cultural environment. Thompson's (2013) study provides useful evidence for understanding mediation within the ZPD. Thompson's (2013) study found a four-phase framework to track mediation through the ZPD: assisted performance (where the learner cannot improve without assistance), self-assisted performance (where the learner begins to initiate their own assistance), developed performance (learners become independent), and recursion (a change in context brings learners back through earlier phases). Thompson's (2013) study strengthens the relevance of mediation to the present study. It suggests that the lecturer's role is not merely to provide information but to create opportunities through which students can co-construct knowledge and develop their English language abilities through guided interaction.

3.4 Scaffolding within the Sociocultural Perspective

In this study, scaffolding may include modelling, questioning, prompting, feedback, clarification, task simplification, and other forms of instructional support. For example, Teiku (2022) found that simplification is a key scaffolding strategy in reading comprehension lessons, enabling learners to engage with complex texts. The lecturer assists according to the learner's needs and gradually reduces that assistance as the learner becomes more capable.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case study research approach because it seeks to explore scaffolding practices and perceptions in depth, which is best accomplished through qualitative methods (Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach also aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the social and cultural context of learning.

4.2 Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Technique

The study was conducted at a tertiary university in Ghana. The target population comprised lecturers who teach English language courses and undergraduate students enrolled in English language programmes. The rationale for including both groups is that lecturers are primary agents of scaffolding and are best positioned to describe and demonstrate scaffolding strategies. Students are also recipients of scaffolded instruction and are best positioned to report their perceptions and experiences. The study employed purposive sampling because participants possess characteristics or experiences directly relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). It enrolled lecturers who were currently teaching English-medium courses, were willing to participate, and were available for observation and interview. Students (i.e., those from years 1 to 4) who were also enrolled in courses taught by participating lecturers and were willing to participate were engaged.

Five (5) lecturers were sampled, which was sufficient for a range of perspectives and manageable for in-depth analysis, and sixty (60) students were included to provide multiple perspectives across levels. The sample size for students was determined based on information power principles (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016), considering the study aim, sample specificity, and quality of dialogue.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

Two main tools were used to generate data for the study: a classroom observation and semi-structured interview guides. A classroom observation protocol was adapted from Walqui (2006) and Hammond and Gibbons (2005) to systematically record scaffolding strategies during lessons. The observation protocol includes a checklist of scaffolding strategies and space for descriptive notes on how strategies were enacted. Participants consented to audio recording of lessons to enable detailed analysis.

Again, two separate semi-structured interview guides were developed: one for lecturers and one for students. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for in-depth exploration while maintaining focus on the research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

4.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data from the observation field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytic narrative. Coding proceeded in two stages. An initial round of open coding was applied line by line to the observation notes and interview transcripts to capture participants' own language and the scaffolding behaviours recorded. This was followed by a focused round of coding in which codes were organised to reflect the exact scaffolding strategies used by the lecturers.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all lecturer and student participants, with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants are maintained through the use of codes.

5. Results

This section presents the results, which are organised according to the three research objectives. The findings are based on analysis of classroom observations (2 lessons) and semi-structured interviews with lecturers (n=5) and undergraduate students (n=60) at the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (USTED), Ghana.

5.1 Objective 1: Scaffolding Strategies Observed

From the observation data, thirteen categories of scaffolding strategies were recorded with varying frequency, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of Observed Scaffolding Strategies (n=2)

Scaffolding Strategy	Frequency of Occurrence	% of Total Instances
Questioning	34	33.3%
Feedback	20	19.6%
Prompting	12	11.8%
Contextualisation	2	2.0%
Other coded strategies	34	33.3%
Total	102	100%

Source: Field Data, 2026

Table 2: Scaffolding Strategies Coding Scheme

Code	Strategy	Description
Q	Questioning	Lecturer uses questions to stimulate thinking, elicit responses, or check understanding
PR	Prompting	Lecturer provides clues or hints that help students arrive at an answer without supplying it directly
FB	Feedback	Lecturer evaluates, acknowledges, or responds to students' contributions
MD	Modelling	Lecturer demonstrates an academically appropriate way of expressing or approaching a concept
RC	Recasting	Lecturer reformulates a student's response into a clearer or more academically appropriate form
CL	Clarification	Lecturer explains or resolves an unclear idea
EL	Elaboration	Lecturer expands a student's answer or adds relevant information
CT	Contextualisation	Lecturer connects an abstract concept to a familiar, every day, or cultural situation
PA	Collaborative/Pair Activity	Lecturer creates structured opportunities for peer learning
SU	Summarisation	Lecturer reviews and consolidates what has been learnt
IA	Independent Application	Task requiring students to apply learning without direct lecturer support

ES	Emotional Support	Lecturer reduces anxiety or affective barriers to participation
IG	Instructional Guidance	Lecturer structures the learning task

Source: Field Data, 2026

Transcribed Classroom Observation 1 (Communication Skills)

Course: Communication Skills

Topic: Barriers to Effective Communication

Duration: 50 minutes

Participants: Lecturer and students

Observation focus: Scaffolding strategies in lecturer–student interaction

5.1.1 Coded Classroom Observation 1

Table 3: Coded Classroom Observation 1 (Communication Skills)

No.	Lecturer's Utterance/Action	Scaffolding Strategy	Code	Function
1	"Can anyone remind us what we discussed in the previous lesson?"	Questioning	Q	Activates prior knowledge
2	"What do we mean by effective communication?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits students' understanding
3	"That's part of it. But is every transfer of information necessarily effective communication?"	Feedback + Questioning	FB + Q	Corrects and encourages deeper thinking
4	"Why?"	Questioning	Q	Encourages explanation
5	"Imagine that I send a WhatsApp message to you saying, 'Meet me there at 10.' What is wrong with that message?"	Contextualisation + Questioning	CT + Q	Connects concept to everyday experience
6	"What is missing from the message?"	Prompting	PR	Guides students towards "clarity"
7	"So, a communication barrier is anything that hinders, distorts or prevents..."	Modelling + Clarification	MD + CL	Provides an academic formulation
8	"Can anyone mention a physical barrier?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits student contribution
9	"Good. Noise. Give me an example."	Feedback + Prompting	FB + PR	Reinforces response and seeks elaboration
10	"Suppose you are giving a presentation and students outside the classroom are shouting."	Contextualisation	CT	Makes the abstract concept concrete
11	"What happens?"	Questioning	Q	Checks understanding
12	"Can you think of another example?"	Prompting	PR	Encourages additional responses
13	"What do we mean by psychological?"	Questioning	Q	Activates linguistic knowledge
14	"Think about the word psychology. What does it have to do with?"	Prompting	PR	Provides a conceptual clue
15	"Good. So psychological barriers have to do with what?"	Feedback + Questioning	FB + Q	Builds on students' response
16	"Exactly. Fear, anxiety, lack of confidence and emotional stress..."	Elaboration	EL	Expands students' understanding
17	"Can culture affect communication?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits prior knowledge
18	"Can you give an example?"	Prompting	PR	Encourages application
19	Ghanaian example involving respect for elderly people	Contextualisation	CT	Connects learning to students' sociocultural context

No.	Lecturer's Utterance/Action	Scaffolding Strategy	Code	Function
20	"Who can mention them?"	Questioning	Q	Checks recall
21	"A lecturer is teaching, but the classroom is located beside a construction site..."	Contextualisation	CT	Presents an authentic situation
22	"What barrier is that?"	Questioning	Q	Checks application
23	"A lecturer uses highly specialised linguistic terminology..."	Contextualisation	CT	Provides another real-life scenario
24	"What barrier?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits classification
25	"Excellent question. Yes, it can."	Feedback	FB	Validates student's contribution
26	"What type of barrier do you think lack of interest might represent?"	Questioning	Q	Promotes analytical thinking
27	"Correct. It may be associated with psychological or attitudinal barriers."	Feedback + Elaboration	FB + EL	Confirms and extends response
28	"Tell me what you mean by emotional noise."	Clarification + Questioning	CL + Q	Seeks clarification of student's idea
29	"Yes. That's a useful way of thinking about it."	Feedback	FB	Encourages participation
30	"In communication studies, the term noise can be used broadly..."	Clarification	CL	Refines conceptual understanding
31	Pair activity on identifying communication barriers	Collaborative scaffolding	PA	Allows students to practise collaboratively
32	Lecturer guides students during paired work by providing clues	Prompting	PR	Provides assistance while students practise
33	"Each pair should identify three barriers..."	Instructional guidance	IG	Structures the learning task
34	"Good. And the third?"	Prompting	PR	Encourages completion of response
35	"Fear of what?"	Prompting	PR	Requests greater specificity
36	"That is a psychological barrier."	Feedback	FB	Confirms and labels student's answer
37	"What is effective communication?"	Questioning	Q	Reviews learning
38	"What is a communication barrier?"	Questioning	Q	Checks conceptual understanding
39	"Mention four barriers."	Questioning	Q	Assesses recall
40	"And what can we do to overcome these barriers?"	Questioning	Q	Encourages application
41	"Good. Excellent. Very good."	Feedback	FB	Reinforces correct responses
42	"Good communication is interactive."	Summarisation	SU	Consolidates the lesson
43	Assignment requiring students to identify five barriers	Independent application	IA	Transfers learning beyond classroom

Source: Field Data, 2026

5.1.2 Observation Notes

The observation indicates that the lecturer employs several forms of instructional scaffolding during the lesson. The lecturer used prompting, particularly when students struggled to provide answers. For example, when students are unable to explain psychological barriers, the lecturer prompts them by asking about the meaning of "psychology." The lecturer then builds on the student's response to arrive at the intended concept. Another prominent strategy is feedback and recasting. The lecturer acknowledges correct responses with expressions such as "Good," "Excellent," and "Very good," while reformulating some students' less precise answers into more academically appropriate expressions. The lecturer also uses contextualisation by connecting abstract concepts to familiar situations, including classroom noise, public speaking anxiety, medical consultations, and Ghanaian cultural practices. Finally, the pair activity provides students with an opportunity to apply the concepts independently while the

lecturer monitors and supports their responses. The lesson therefore demonstrates a gradual movement from teacher explanation → guided questioning → student participation → collaborative activity → independent application.

5.1.3 Transcribed Classroom Observation 2

Course: Literature-in-English

Topic: Poetry Analysis – Theme Analysis

Poem: *The Pulley* by George Herbert

Duration: Approximately 50 minutes

Participants: Lecturer (L) and Students (S1–S8)

Observation Focus: Lecturer–student interaction and teacher scaffolding

5.1.4 Coded Classroom Observation 2

Table 4: Coded Classroom Observation 2

No.	Lecturer's Utterance/Action	Scaffolding Strategy	Code	Function
1	"Who can tell me what we mean by poetry?"	Questioning	Q	Activates prior knowledge
2	"What else do we look at when we study a poem?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits literary concepts
3	"What does the word pulley mean?"	Questioning	Q	Activates vocabulary knowledge
4	"If a poet chooses the title <i>The Pulley</i> , what might you expect the poem to be about?"	Questioning + Prompting	Q + PR	Encourages prediction
5	"Titles can have both literal and symbolic meanings."	Clarification	CL	Establishes interpretive distinction
6	"What is happening in the poem?"	Questioning	Q	Checks initial comprehension
7	"Don't worry about giving me a perfect answer."	Emotional support	ES	Reduces fear of participation
8	"What is God doing in the poem?"	Questioning	Q	Directs attention to content
9	"Why would the poet talk about God giving these gifts?"	Questioning	Q	Encourages interpretation
10	"Why are they still dissatisfied?"	Questioning	Q	Guides thematic analysis
11	"What does the poet suggest about human beings?"	Questioning	Q	Encourages inference
12	"Look at the last lines again."	Prompting	PR	Directs students to textual evidence
13	"What do we call the idea that human beings are never completely satisfied?"	Questioning	Q	Elicits thematic concept
14	"Think of the word we use when someone always wants something more."	Prompting	PR	Provides conceptual clue
15	"Greed can be related, but I am looking for a broader concept."	Feedback + Clarification	FB + CL	Refines student's response
16	"More specifically, we can talk about human dissatisfaction..."	Modelling	MD	Models academic terminology
17	"What relationship do you see between human dissatisfaction and God?"	Questioning	Q	Promotes synthesis
18	"What is the first major theme we can identify?"	Questioning	Q	Guides theme identification
19	"We can express that more academically as human dependence on God."	Recasting	RC	Improves academic expression
20	"Why do you say God's generosity?"	Questioning	Q	Requests justification
21	"The poem presents God as generous..."	Elaboration	EL	Extends interpretation
22	"When analysing a theme, don't simply mention the theme."	Modelling	MD	Models literary analysis

23	"What evidence can I use?"	Questioning	Q	Promotes evidence-based interpretation
24	Everyday examples involving phones and shoes	Contextualisation	CT	Connects poem to everyday life
25	"What does this tell us about human desire?"	Questioning	Q	Links context to theme
26	"Can anyone improve or add something to that?"	Prompting	PR	Encourages peer elaboration
27	Pair activity identifying themes and evidence	Collaborative activity	PA	Provides guided practice
28	"Can you identify the specific gifts?"	Prompting	PR	Requests textual specificity
29	"That makes your argument stronger."	Feedback	FB	Reinforces analytical practice
30	"Is greed exactly the same as dissatisfaction?"	Questioning	Q	Develops conceptual distinction
31	"Greed is an excessive desire... whereas dissatisfaction..."	Clarification + Elaboration	CL + EL	Differentiates concepts
32	"What poem did we study?"	Questioning	Q	Reviews learning
33	"What was our main focus?"	Questioning	Q	Checks lesson objective
34	"What must we remember when discussing a theme?"	Questioning	Q	Consolidates analytical principle
35	"A good literary analysis does not merely make claims..."	Modelling + Summarisation	MD + SU	Models analytical writing
36	Assignment requiring students to analyse one theme	Independent application	IA	Transfers learning independently

Source: Field Data, 2026

5.1.5 Observation Notes

The second observation demonstrates that questioning is the dominant scaffolding strategy, with the lecturer using questions to move students from basic comprehension of the poem towards interpretation and thematic analysis. The lecturer also uses prompting to help students move beyond surface-level interpretations. For instance, when students struggle to identify the concept of dissatisfaction, the lecturer provides conceptual clues without immediately supplying the answer. Another significant strategy is recasting. The lecturer transforms the student's expression, "The importance of God," into the more academically appropriate concept of "human dependence on God." This demonstrates how scaffolding can support not only conceptual understanding but also the development of academic literary language. The lesson also demonstrates gradual release of responsibility. Initially, the lecturer provides substantial guidance through questioning and explanation. Students then work collaboratively to identify themes and supporting evidence before receiving an independent assignment. Thus, the overall scaffolding pattern can be represented as: Prior knowledge → Guided reading → Questioning → Prompting → Interpretation → Textual evidence → Collaborative practice → Independent literary analysis.

5.1.6 Interpretation of Objective 1 Results

The two observations show that both lecturers relied predominantly on questioning, supported by contingent feedback and prompting. Each lecturer used these approaches to suit the demands of their courses. In the communication skills classroom, the lecturer's use of scaffolding helped students to understand the barriers to effective communication, while in the literature class, the students, through scaffolding, gained deeper interpretation. Lecturers mostly use these strategies to mediate students' movement from teacher-guided understanding towards independent application. These patterns are consistent with, and provide empirical support for the study's theoretical framing of scaffolding as a contingent, fading, dialogically mediated process through which lecturers, acting as the More Knowledgeable Other, guide students through their Zone of Proximal Development. This progression mirrors the fading and transfer of responsibility that Van de Pol et al. (2010) identify as necessary complements to contingent support.

5.2 Objective 2: Students' Perceptions of Scaffolding Effectiveness

Objective 2 data were generated through semi-structured interviews. The responses were analysed thematically, and five major themes emerged. They are: improved understanding, effective feedback, increased participation, enhanced confidence, and development of independent learning. All sixty (60) students and five (5) lecturers were interviewed and transcribed. However, for

illustration, ten (10) students and two (2) lecturers were presented as examples of the themes. The following themes are discussed below.

5.2.1 Improved Understanding of English Language Tasks

The interview responses suggest that students perceived lecturers' explanations, examples, and guided assistance as useful in helping them understand difficult English language tasks.

Student 1: "When the lecturer explains something and gives us examples, it becomes easier for me to understand."

Student 12: "Sometimes I don't understand the topic at first, but when the lecturer breaks it down into smaller parts, I get it."

These responses indicate that students viewed explanation and simplification as important forms of scaffolding.

Again, some of the lecturers confirmed that their use of scaffolding strategies was deliberate to improve learners' comprehension.

Lecturer 4: "I strategically use questioning, prompts, and group activities so that my students will get an in-depth understanding of the content I teach them."

5.2.2 Feedback Helps Students Improve

Students also perceived lecturer feedback as an important form of support. They indicated that feedback helped them identify mistakes and understand how to improve their English.

Student 3: "I prefer when the lecturer explains the correction instead of just saying that the answer is wrong."

The responses suggest that students valued explanatory feedback. It helped them to understand their errors rather than merely being informed that they had made mistakes.

Also, the lecturers noted in the interview that feedback is an important pedagogical strategy that improves students' performance.

Lecturer 1: When I provide feedback to my students, I see great improvement in their subsequent work.

5.2.3 Questioning Encourages Participation

Students and lecturers perceived questioning as useful. Students indicated that lecturers' questions encouraged them to think and participate rather than simply receiving information, while lecturers disclosed that questioning drives students to participate in their lectures.

Student 4: "The questions make me participate because I have to try to answer."

Student 25: "When the lecturer gives us hints through questions, I can eventually get the answer."

Lecturer 1: "If you want the lecture to be interactive and participatory, then questioning is the best option. That is what I use, and almost everyone in the hall participates in the lecture."

This suggests that questioning and prompting were perceived as strategies that encouraged active involvement in English language learning.

5.2.4 Scaffolding Enhances Confidence

The response further indicates that appropriate lecturer support contributed to students' confidence in using English.

Student 6: "At first I was afraid to speak English in class, but the lecturer encouraged us to try even when we made mistakes."

The response suggests that scaffolding was a means of creating a classroom environment in which students felt more comfortable using English.

5.2.5 Scaffolding Promotes Independent Learning

A final theme concerned the gradual development of learner independence. Students indicated that lecturer support was most useful when it eventually enabled them to complete tasks without assistance.

Student 17: "The lecturer first guides us, but later we are asked to do it ourselves."

Student 8: "When we practise after the lecturer has explained, I can sometimes do the work without help."

This finding is particularly relevant to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, as the students' responses suggest movement from assisted performance towards greater independence.

5.2.6 Interpretation of Objective 2 Results

The findings indicate that students generally perceive lecturers' scaffolding strategies as helpful in their language learning. The students' responses suggest that scaffolding is effective because it provides support at points where they experience difficulty while still allowing them to participate actively in the learning process. From Vygotsky's perspective, this can be understood as assistance provided within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The lecturer provides the support necessary for the student to accomplish a task that may initially be difficult to perform independently.

5.3 Objective 3: Lecturers' Scaffolding as a Support for Students' Development within the ZPD

Analysis of the semi-structured interview responses revealed four major themes: guided assistance, gradual reduction of support, opportunities for independent practice, and increased learner confidence and competence. The themes are discussed below.

5.3.1 Guided Assistance Helps Students Perform Difficult Tasks

The responses suggest that lecturers initially provide students with guidance when they cannot complete the task independently. *Student 21: "When the work is difficult, the lecturer guides us step by step until we understand it."*

The response suggests that teacher support enables students to perform tasks that are initially beyond their independent ability.

5.3.2 Gradual Withdrawal of Support

Another important theme was the gradual reduction of lecturer assistance. Students indicated that lecturers did not always continue providing the same level of support once they became more familiar with a task.

Student 32: "When we understand the topic, the lecturer stops helping us too much and allows us to work independently."

This suggests that scaffolding was perceived as a temporary form of assistance rather than permanent support.

5.3.3 Opportunities for Independent Practice

The findings also indicate that students were given opportunities to apply what they had learned without continuous lecturer assistance.

Student 37: "After explaining the topic, the lecturer gives us exercises to do on our own."

Student 18: "We are sometimes asked to discuss the questions in groups before presenting our answers."

Student 49: "The lecturer allows us to try first before correcting us."

These responses suggest that independent and collaborative practice provides students with opportunities to test and consolidate their developing English language abilities.

5.3.4 Increased Confidence and Competence

Students further reported that repeated guidance and practice helped them become more confident in expressing their ideas and participating in class discussions.

Student 10: "When I first started, I needed a lot of help with presentations, but now I can prepare and present without much assistance."

This suggests that appropriate scaffolding can contribute to students' progression from dependence on teacher assistance towards greater confidence and competence.

5.3.5 Interpretation of Objective 3 Results

The findings indicate that teacher scaffolding facilitates students' movement within the ZPD by providing temporary and responsive assistance. Teacher scaffolding therefore creates practice opportunities and gradually transfers responsibility to learners. Students' accounts suggest that this process enables them to progress from requiring substantial guidance to performing English language tasks with increasing confidence and independence. The findings therefore support the sociocultural view that learning is first mediated through social interaction before becoming increasingly internalised by the learner.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Predominance of Questioning as a Scaffolding Strategy

The finding that questioning was the dominant scaffolding strategy in both observed lessons is consistent with Ellis's (2003, p. 180) characterisation of scaffolding as a fundamentally dialogic process. This aligns with Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) original account of tutoring as an interactive, turn-by-turn activity rather than one-directional instruction. From a Vygotskian perspective, questioning operates within the ZPD by challenging students to perform at a level just beyond their current capability. When a lecturer asks a question, the student is required to recall, apply, or analyse information, moving from actual to potential development levels. This finding echoes Walqui's (2006) description of scaffolding as operating at the level of moment-to-moment interaction, where the lecturer's questions functioned as contingent, in-the-moment adjustments. This result also aligns with Owusu et al. (2022), which stresses teacher questioning as pedagogic strategies for stimulating learners' interaction. Also, Van de Pol et al. (2010) identify contingency as central to effective scaffolding, and questioning, which serve as key tools for contingent support.

6.2 Feedback and Prompting as Scaffolding Strategies

The finding that feedback was the second most common strategy in Lesson 1 (19.6%) and present in Lesson 2 (9.3%) corresponds with Amaniampong et al.'s (2026) findings on the centrality of constructive dialogic feedback in Ghanaian L2 classrooms. Students' preference for explanatory feedback (Theme 2) suggests that feedback functions best as scaffolding when it explains rather than simply corrects. Again, the use of prompting (12-14%) aligns with Van de Pol and Elbers' (2013) emphasis on scaffolding as

contingent assistance. It provides cognitive scaffolding that supports the learner's own thinking. From a sociocultural perspective, feedback and prompting serve as mediational tools that guide learners through the ZPD.

6.3 Students' Perceptions of Scaffolding

6.3.1 Enhancing Understanding and Engagement through Explanation, Feedback, and Questioning

Students' perception that explanation and simplification are helpful aligns with the theoretical understanding of scaffolding as making tasks accessible (Gibbons, 2015). Breaking down complex tasks into manageable parts operates within the ZPD by reducing cognitive load while maintaining the fundamental challenge. Moreover, students' preference for explanatory feedback suggests that feedback works best when it gives learners tools for improvement. This aligns with Amaniampong et al.'s (2026) findings on the importance of dialogic feedback. Again, students' perception that questioning encourages participation aligns with Zhang's (2023) finding that teacher-student rapport and engagement are positively related. Questioning creates a dialogic space in which students are active participants rather than passive recipients.

6.3.2 Confidence Building through Scaffolding

Students' perception that scaffolding builds confidence aligns with Damanhour's (2021) finding that scaffolding enhances motivation. Emotional support (identified as a separate theme) contributes to a positive learning environment in which students feel safe to take risks. Again, students' perception that scaffolding promotes independent learning is central to the ZPD concept. As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, what is initially accomplished with social support becomes internalised and available for independent performance.

6.4 Scaffolding and ZPD Movement

6.4.1 Guided Assistance as ZPD Enactment and Gradual Withdrawal of Support (Fading)

The finding that guided assistance enables task completion is a direct illustration of the ZPD in action. Students are operating at the

potential developmental level that is accomplishing with guidance what they cannot accomplish alone. Moreover, the finding that students perceived support as temporary and gradually withdrawn reflects Van de Pol et al.'s (2010) concept of fading. Fading is essential for effective scaffolding—without it, learners may become dependent rather than autonomous.

6.4.2 Building Confidence and Competence through Independent Practice

The finding that students were given opportunities for independent practice suggests that lecturers understand the importance of consolidation. Independent practice enables learners to apply and consolidate what they have learned. On the other hand, the finding that repeated guidance and practice build confidence and competence reflects the developmental progression that Vygotsky (1978) describes. As learners operate within their ZPDs and receive appropriate scaffolding, they develop the capabilities to perform tasks independently.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the scaffolding strategies lecturers use to support undergraduate students' English language acquisition, students' perceptions of the effectiveness of those strategies, and how teacher support facilitates movement within students' Zone of Proximal Development. The study concludes that teacher scaffolding in a higher education context is sensitive to the demands of the course being taught. This supports the study's theoretical framing of the lecturer as a More Knowledgeable Other who mediates learning through language and cultural tools, and confirms the relevance of Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, and specifically the ZPD, mediation, and MKO constructs, for understanding English language teaching and learning in Ghanaian higher education. The study's principal limitation is its scope: the findings are based on two classroom observations in two courses, and while they provide rich, contextually grounded evidence, they cannot be generalised to all lecturers, courses, or institutions without further research.

8. Recommendation

The study recommends that universities offer targeted professional development for lecturers on contingent questioning and prompting techniques, since these were the most frequently used. It is further recommended that lecturers build structured opportunities for independent application into every lesson since these stages appeared central to the transfer of responsibility from lecturer to student. Curriculum developers should also consider providing a shared repertoire, or toolkit, of scaffolding strategies that lecturers across departments can adapt to their own subject matter. The study examined only two lessons at a single institution. Because of this, the researchers recommend a longitudinal design that follows the same lecturers and students across a semester to examine more directly whether, and how, scaffolded interaction moves specific language skills. This will offer stronger empirical support for, or refinement of, the ZPD-based account of scaffolding.

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